About Mac

a bittersweet memoir

Patricia Swan

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On the cover: Mac and Patricia, May, 1981.

For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: "It might have been!"

Maud Muller (1856) by John Greenleaf Whittier

Prologue

When Mac and I met, neither of us had ever heard of sexual harassment or mutual consent. We had learned the rules of social behavior when we became adults in the fifties, but somewhere after 1960 the rules blurred. On that Sunday afternoon at the Village Green Resort near Roseburg, Oregon, I felt quite liberated. I had filed for divorce and had landed a job that would support my family. During that enlightening and independent phase of my life, I experimented with newfound freedoms, testing the boundaries that had been established years earlier.

I entered the building through a long covered atrium leading to the crowded coffee shop. Rather than wait for a table, I took the only available seat at the counter where I sipped tomato juice from a frosted glass. I stared at the coffee pot and stack of cups in front of me. It was August 1978, and I was traveling alone.

Part I, Romance

August 1978 to May 1979

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The Name's Mac

"Anything else?" the waitress asked.

I shook my head.

She laid the check in front of the gentleman sitting next to me. "Are you together?"

"No, damn it," said the man on my left. He spoke into his coffee cup. When I reached for my check, his callused hand moved quicker than mine and covered the bill.

I studied the hand; a workingman's hand, suntanned with a variety of scars indicating a high-risk lifestyle. His manicured nails and a Mason's ring showed the principled side of the man attached to this hand.

The seams of his pressed chambray shirt accommodated broad shoulders. The jeans were new. He turned, and I looked into clear blue eyes that had developed the ability to see much and reveal little. Silver gray hair framed his weathered face. A carefully trimmed beard strengthened a weak chin and complimented a boyish smile. "The name's Mac," he said.

"Nice to know you, Mac." I nodded toward the aforementioned hand still covering my ticket. "I'd like my check, please."

"Allow me," he said.

It had been a long time since anyone had paid me this kind of attention, and there was something about talking to a stranger in a roadside cafè that brought out the gambler in me. For the first time that day, I felt invigorated. I wanted to make the most of whatever it was that caused the high.

"I pay my own bills, but thank you for the offer," I said.

I saw a sparkle in his eye and a slight smile on his thin lips. "Are you one of those liberated women?" he teased. "Or are you proud?"

I paused to consider his question. His tone told me that he held a negative attitude toward the same women I admired, but I wasn't about to let him think I was a dependent person. "I guess I'm proud. Besides, nothing's free. There's always a cost."

"So, you think I want something from you? What would you have thought if I had offered to buy your dinner?"

He'd put me on the spot, but I could play his game, and once I got into my car, the game would be over. "I'd think you wanted a little after-dinner affection," I answered with a straight face.

"Now, why would you think such a thing? You certainly jump to conclusions about a thirty-five cent glass of tomato juice. I assure you I can afford it." His teasing eyes almost danced with challenge.

"I'm sure you can."

"But you're right." He cocked his head and spoke to the countertop. "I do want something from you. I want to know your name."

He was so smooth that I knew I could trust him to be exactly what he appeared to be, a pick-up artist. "My name's Jane." I lied.

"Why is an attractive woman like you traveling alone on a Sunday afternoon, Jane?" The way he emphasized the name told me he knew it wasn't mine.

"Going back to work tomorrow. Vacation's over," I said.

"What do you do?"

"I work for the state."

"Social work?"

"Something like that." I liked his voice. It had a sincere quality in spite of the practiced lines.

"I'm on the road too," he said. "Went to my father's funeral, but tomorrow, it's back to running line for the power company."

"I'm sorry about your father."

"Don't be. He'd been sick a long time. His death was a blessing."

He turned away from me, so I changed the subject. "They're building a power line in Gold Beach," I said. "Supposed to accommodate the growth area along the water."

"That so?" He stared into his coffee cup again. "What do you know about Gold Beach?"

"That's where I work."

Mac snapped to attention. "So do I. You're talking about my project."

I saw the teasing twinkle reappear, and I braced myself for his next move.

"We have about three hours from here to Gold Beach," he said. "How about letting me buy your dinner this evening?" His thin lips curled into an impish grin. "Before you accept, remember, you made the rules."

The combination of Mac's charm and the coincidence of fate told me not to blow this one. I felt alive, like the woman I had abandoned for twenty years while being married to an inattentive dictator. I wanted more of the excitement Mac offered.

"Before I accept, I'd like to renegotiate conditions," I said. "For dinner, I'll provide stimulating conversation. If that isn't enough, I'll pay my bill."

"That's a start," he said. "I like the Red and White Cafè. Meet me there at seven."

"I don't know the place."

"It's on Highway 101, across from the high school. Sits high on the ridge at the top of the hill. It's red with white shutters. You can't miss it."

Mac took my arm and escorted me through the parking lot. I stopped at my '74 Pinto and he held the car's door until I was comfortably seated. His courtesy confused me. I had read *The Feminine Mystique*, and I knew that such accommodations minimized the value of women, but my inner child was flattered. I felt appreciated even though I was aware of Mac's visual assessment of my backsides while he so gallantly held the door.

The August sun poured down. I opened the windows to allow the air to circulate through the car while traveling Interstate Five. I pressed the accelerator to the floor to get the little blue Ford up to fifty-five. Mac whizzed past in a black Lincoln Mark IV with Arizona plates.

My gold wedding band felt unusually tight as I gripped the wheel. The day I filed for divorce, I was tempted to throw the thing in

the trash along with the failed marriage, but I couldn't do that just yet. I was the new 4-H agent in Curry County, the southernmost county on the Oregon Coast. I couldn't let anyone know that my marriage had ended. Not yet.

With the wind in my hair and an urgency to reach Gold Beach in my heart, I left the freeway and took the cutoff through the Coast Range. The twisting miles followed the emerald-green Umpqua River through an endless maze of evergreen-covered rock walls. With each curve, each approaching car, the elk in the field, the pelicans on pilings, I pondered the risk potential of meeting Mac for dinner.

I knew nothing about Mac. He could have been a priest or an ax murderer. In all probability, he was just a man, but I didn't know. I had been caught up in a performance, an act he had spent a lifetime perfecting. Once the hypnotizing haze of the moment lifted, I lost my nerve. There were too many possibilities, too many reasons to forget the exciting stranger.

As I turned south at Reedsport on Highway 101, I felt the cool ocean breeze, a refreshing change from the oppressing heat inland. I tuned the radio to the only station I could find, a country station. Waylon Jennings belted out the soulful line: He's a taker; he'll take her to places she's never been. I knew I should heed Waylon's wisdom and go to my room and stay put, but I hummed along, "He'll take her to places she's never been."

I slowed down and entered Wedderburn where Reelect Rice for Sheriff signs dotted the roadside. Before going home, I would find the place Mac recommended.

I crossed the Rogue River Bridge and followed Highway 101 through town. I located the Red and White Cafè, a hideous eyesore

that had been remodeled too many times. Red geraniums framed the windows. Plank steps dropped from the entrance some twenty feet to the street. The white door stood out against the bright red of the rambling building that seemed too tall for its place on the ridge. I wondered what kept the antiquated structure from tumbling over during the fierce Pacific storms.

As I looked up at the strange building, an unsettling feeling of longing surged through me. I felt I had stepped out of a locked cell and was on the threshold of a new life with all the disjointed intrigue of the unusual architecture. It attracted at the same time it repelled, but good judgment prevailed and I drove home.

Home was a bedroom I had rented from Vera, an older woman I had met at church when I lived in Gold Beach with my family five years earlier. She had known about my struggle to keep my family together, but she didn't know we had failed. She would have been supportive, but Vera had too many friends, and she talked. I concluded that she gossiped to keep her active mind busy, and I preferred that she talk about somebody else.

The house was quiet, and I took my things from the car wondering when Vera would return. I smiled when I saw the note on the refrigerator giving me permission to eat the fruit in the bowl.

When I unpacked the last suitcase, I glanced at my watch. In thirty minutes, Mac would be waiting for me in the Red and White Cafè. Or would he? Maybe he was playing a game. Maybe he had no intention of being there.

Questions plagued me. I was sure that Mac didn't live in a vacuum. Did he have a family? If so, where were they? Why did his car have Arizona plates? He said he worked on a power line. Did that

kind of work pay well enough to buy the fancy car he drove? I didn't know. In fact, I didn't know much about the lives of people who weren't teachers or social workers.

I arranged my possessions and had begun thinking about the work I had left on my desk when I heard Vera enter the house. She wasn't alone. Soon she knocked. "Pat," she whispered through the closed door. "Would you mind taking dinner out tonight? I have a guest." Vera had an active social life, and we had agreed before I moved in that I would disappear for a few hours when her "guests" visited.

"Sure," I answered. "I was thinking about eating at that place across from the high school."

"The Red and White Cafè? That's a great seafood restaurant. The salmon's wonderful," Vera added.

I heard a male voice call to Vera and then the hall door closed. I showered, and then I dressed in a dark blue double-knit pantsuit. No pantyhose; too hot. I found a pair of sandals that looked okay with the suit, checked my makeup, combed my windblown hair into a ponytail, and slipped out to my car.

Tourist traffic filled the small-town street. I had to wait to get onto Highway 101. It was jammed, bumper-to-bumper for miles. I waited. Finally, I saw a break in traffic long enough for the lazy Pinto to blend safely. I arrived at the cafè several minutes late. A few cars were parked at the curb, but none were Lincolns.

I considered the possibility that Mac had driven another vehicle, or that he had walked, but the evidence was clear; he had never planned to meet me. My feet felt heavy as I climbed the steps to the white door. I stepped inside and saw a cheerful dining room with

red-and-white checkered tablecloths on round tables, but Mac was not there. I checked the bar on the far side of the cafè and he wasn't there either. He had been toying with me. The dinner invitation was a line. He had forgotten me as soon as I was out of sight. Why did I hold on to the hope that he would be waiting for me to walk through that door?

When I accepted the fact that Mac wasn't coming, I turned to leave. The waiter called a name, but I had little awareness of anything beyond a sinking feeling of disappointment. I was halfway down the steps when I heard what the waiter had said: "Jane." He had called for Jane!

I raced back up the steps.

The waiter grinned at my hasty return. "Are you Jane?" he asked.

"Yes, that's my name."

"Your gentleman asked me to seat you. He told me to tell you that he'd be here shortly."

"Did he give his name?"

"He said Jane would know who he was."

I waited for half an hour with my eyes on the entrance to the parking lot, but Mac didn't show. I studied the menu and ordered coffee. I sipped more than one cup before deciding to order. Cereal and tomato juice had been my only sustenance that day, and my stomach growled in retaliation. I had to eat. "It appears that my friend stood me up," I told the waiter. "I'll order now."

"I suggest you wait a few more minutes. He's often late." Mac must have been a regular for the waiter to know his personal habits.

I waited another fifteen minutes before the black Lincoln pulled up to the curb. I watched Mac get out of his car. He was

wearing Italian boots, jeans, a western cut shirt with the cuffs rolled back, showing a large piece of turquoise jewelry mounted in silver, but Mac was not a cowboy. No self-respecting cowboy would have worn that jewelry without a Stetson, and Mac's head displayed no such adornment – just a wealth of wavy gray hair.

He spoke to the waiter before approaching me. When he turned my way, I saw the familiar teasing look I remembered from the Village Green.

"So you did show," he said. "You weren't here earlier."

"I was a few minutes late,"

"So was I." He smiled.

I smiled back and let the obvious difference in our definition of "a few minutes" pass.

The waiter brought Mac's drink. "Your Tanqueray on the rocks with three olives, sir."

"Thank you Randy, but the lady needs a drink too."

"I'm fine with coffee," I said. I was so hungry that I didn't want to linger over drinks.

Mac ignored my comment. "Bring a bottle of your finest Riesling." He turned to me. "Goes with the fish. You do like salmon, don't you, the house specialty?"

By that time, I could have eaten clam-digging boots.

We stared at each other. Unlike the Village Green, this was no game. Mac was real and we lived in the same town. I felt awkward and sensed that Mac did too. Someone had to start the conversation so I fell back on old habits. "How long have you been in Gold Beach?" I asked.

"Since June. I don't like being away from home, but the money's good, and the job will only take a few months."

"Where's home?"

"Phoenix."

"My home's in Lebanon."

"Middle East?"

"No, the one in Oregon. It's near Salem." I have never been good at small talk, but this conversation was below my usual standards. I tottered on the edge of forbidden experience, and my communication skills eluded me.

Mac asked another question, but I was so self-absorbed that the words didn't register. They were just friendly noise, like listening to a conversation in another language.

Mac's eyes held me like a fly in a web, and I clenched my fist in my lap. What had he said? What had brought me to Gold Beach? I took a deep breath. "I'm the 4-H agent until May."

"Then you go back to Lebanon?"

"Then, if I play my cards right, I'll have a permanent position somewhere else in Oregon." I sipped the wine and waited for food. The wine went straight to my head, making it difficult to think. My attraction to Mac disturbed me. I touched the napkin to my lips and laid it down repeatedly. I hadn't felt this nervous around a man in years.

"I had to buy a trailer. Couldn't find an apartment, and I don't like living in motels," Mac said.

The image of having someone else make my bed sounded wonderful to me, but living in motels would cost a lot of money. "Yes I know. They're expensive."

Mac laughed. “The company would pay for it. I don’t like motels because they’re not private enough.”

“I’m living with a friend,” I said. “She has a big house, and I rent a room.” I giggled. “She’s quite a gal; tolerant about everything except alcohol. I’m not allowed to drink in her house.”

“Well then,” Mac lifted his glass. “Here’s to dining out.” He touched my glass. His smile and the sip of wine warmed my empty stomach. Mac looked toward the waiter. “They’re slow tonight. I expected our salads by now.”

Eventually the food came, and I relaxed. We finished the main course and the wine. Mac ordered a créme-de-menthe for each of us and pulled a package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. He motioned to me. I shook my head. “Quit years ago,” I said.

“I wish I could. I’ve tried. Was doing pretty good until my old man got sick, and I started again.” He laid the package on the table, picked it up, put it back in his pocket, took it out again, and toyed with the cellophane. To be polite, I said, “I don’t mind,” even though breathing cigarette smoke made me wheeze.

A drunk from the bar stumbled our way. “Hello Mac.” He swayed while he leaned on the table, talking into Mac’s face. “Didja hear ‘bout John?”

Mac slid his chair close to mine and gave the drunk some space. “I did. Bailed him out an hour ago.”

“He got horny. That’s all.”

“Sheriff Rice said John started a fight. John says he was talking to a lady at the bar. She was alone, watching her man hustle some other dame, but when he saw John talking to her, he rushed back and began roughing her up. John stepped in and they arrested

him for starting a fight." Mac nodded toward the bar. "That's the husband over there."

The drunk glanced at the infamous husband. "Bastard!" He turned to me. "Hello Jennnnnet," he slurred.

"Fred, Jeanette is my wife's name. This lady's name is Jane."

The word wife resounded in my ears like a horn blast in a tunnel. I should have guessed, but I hadn't, and now that I knew, I felt tricked.

Fred lit a cigarette and offered one to each of us. I refused, but Mac lit up and smoke snaked from the glowing tips around the table and headed straight for me. I waved the wisps away but the gray cloud attacked me relentlessly.

My stomach hurt and I fought tears. I felt like such a fool. Mac had talked about his home in Phoenix, but he hadn't said anything about a wife. Of course, I hadn't said anything about a husband. I hadn't mentioned my family at all. I doubted that Mac would be interested in my motherly patter about my teenagers who thought they were adults. All that was back in Lebanon, along with the memory of a marriage that should never have happened. Right now, a smelly drunk blew smoke my way and I felt sick.

Fred tipped his empty can of beer to his lips once more. Assured that he had swallowed the last drop, he stumbled back to the bar. Mac watched Fred cross the room and disappear into the shadows. To me, he said, "I should have told you." He took my left hand and slid his index finger over my wedding band. "I didn't think it would be a problem for you. It isn't for me."

"I'm divorced," I said.

"Sure you are." He put his hand on my shoulder and I felt his knee against mine. He leaned toward me. "Back at the Village Green, you–" He left the sentence hanging. He sat upright, and slid his chair away from the table. He puffed on the cigarette. "Are you all right? You look a little green?"

"I'm not feeling well. I need some air." I stood, but my legs buckled and I grabbed the table.

Mac snuffed his cigarette. From his jeans' pocket, he pulled a money clip holding an inch-thick cache of bills. I stared at the wad of money. He slapped a hundred on the table and called to the waiter. "That should cover it, Randy." Turning to me, he said, "I'm taking you home."

"You don't need to. I have my car," I said.

"You're not driving. Grab onto me."

He helped me to the landing. I stumbled. The steps looked steeper than I remembered.

"Be careful," he said. "These steps are slippery."

I grabbed the handrail, and Mac took my arm and guided me to the bottom.

"You don't normally drink, do you?"

"Not on an empty stomach." The mention of food made me gag.

Mac urged me toward his car. It wasn't yet ten o'clock and Vera would still be entertaining her friend. I didn't want to embarrass her with my puke-green entrance. "I can't go home yet," I said.

Mac looked like he'd won a prize. If he was trying to be serious, he failed. A brief but suppressed grin gave him away. "Why not?"

"I don't want my landlady to see me this way."

"We could walk along the beach." I saw the tease return to his eyes. "If you get sick there, the seagulls will adore you."

He guided me across the highway – not so crowded now – down a gravel road by the high school to a well-worn path through driftwood and rocks to the beach where an occasional seagull screeched over the pounding surf. We approached the water's edge where the stench of rotting kelp lifted from the wet sand, and the waves lapped at our feet. "You'll ruin your boots in this," I said.

"And your shoes," he added. "Let's go barefoot."

"Wonderful idea." I filled my lungs with the damp ocean air, and my stomach settled down to occasional rumblings.

Mac steadied me while I removed my sandals.

"I'm sorry about what happened back there. It didn't occur to me that you would care that I was married."

I couldn't believe my ears. "Why wouldn't I care? Are you accustomed to picking up women whenever your wife isn't with you?" I used my most disapproving snarl.

"Yes," he said without a blink of hesitation. "I am."

I didn't know what to say. His admission to blatant promiscuity should have turned me running, but in my state of recent liberation and inexperience, I was drawn to him. I had never met a man like Mac and he fascinated me.

Mac sat on a log and pulled his boots off. "Don't worry about Jeanette. She has no intention of wasting her precious time in a hick town like Gold Beach." The acid in Mac's voice corroded the night air. "She won't be coming around here. That's for sure!"

We continued our stroll down the beach. The winds had died down in the early evening change of airflow, and we sauntered along, laughing and swinging our footwear with each step. The wet sand squished between our toes, and the waves slid up the beach and surprised us. An orange August moon lifted off the irregular horizon and climbed upward in the fading sky. Mac's hand moved from my arm to my waist. It felt as natural as a lifelong habit. "Who are you, Jane? What's your real name?"

"Patricia Adams. And what's your full name, Mac?"

"Donald McElder."

"Irish?"

"My parents are Irish. I don't know what I am. I was adopted."

We watched Gold Beach pass and we walked on and on. Looking up from the water's edge, the high school retreated behind us and travel trailers lined the beach.

"Patricia," Mac stopped and motioned inland. "See that tree – the spiky one in the floodlight just above the big log over there? That's a monkey tree. My trailer's in the space beside the tree. I guess that makes me the monkey."

I snickered.

Mac turned to me and our eyes locked in anxious anticipation. "You're very attractive," he said.

I lifted my chin, expecting him to kiss me, but he just looked at me.

"Another time," he said. "It's getting late."

The next morning started badly. My head ached, I couldn't find my shoes, and my hair needed washing. I had overslept, and I didn't have time to shower.

I hated Mac for leaving me wanting. Why hadn't he kissed me? He had been a gentleman throughout the evening. It was I who acted like a self-centered prima donna. So what if he was married? I wasn't married – at least I wouldn't be once the waiting period had expired. I didn't feel married.

Mac had asked me out to dinner, and apparently that's all he intended. I was the one thinking his invitation meant something more.

He said his trailer shared a space with the monkey tree. I'd go there and just tell him that I had made a fool of myself, that I was sorry, and then I'd leave. He'd probably want nothing to do with me. He probably had a little black book filled with names of women just aching to sleep with him. He had said that being married wasn't a problem – whatever that meant, but it certainly didn't mean what I had seen the previous night. What was wrong with me? Why had he rejected me?

My internal dialogue escalated throughout the day, and by five o'clock I had worked myself into a smoldering rage. I hated Mac and I wanted to tell him so. I left work intent on seeking him out and letting him have it. I had no trouble finding the place. The monkey tree led me to his Mark IV parked next to a new trailer.

I knocked on the door. Nobody answered, but I saw the blinds move. I heard footsteps and the snap of a lock. The door opened a crack.

"Oh, it's you. I thought you were the landlady. Come in." He opened the door wearing only a terry wrap around his hips. His

weight-lifter biceps and tight abs were bare. “The landlady’s been bugging me about parking too close to her precious monkey tree. Seems it’s rare or something. Have a seat. Just got out of the shower. Give me a minute to put some pants on.”

Mac disappeared behind a folding partition on my left and I remained standing in the little space between the door and the apartment sized gas range. “I won’t stay long,” I said. I looked around. On my right a table with bench seats filled the end of the singlewide travel trailer. Everything was in order, clean, and efficiently arranged. The only items out of place were pieces of unopened mail spread across the table. A picture of a pretty blonde that I guessed to be Jeanette watched me from its frame on the wall. “I just wanted to apologize for last night,” I called.

Mac stepped out from behind the barrier, zipping his fly. He put his hands on my shoulders. “Shush,” he said. “Don’t spoil the fantasy.”

His condescending attitude irritated me. “What the hell are you talking about? What fantasy?”

He grinned. “My fantasy. You’re my ice queen.”

That was more than I could stand. My temper flared. My voice pitched upward. “The last thing in the world I want to be is your ice queen,” I sputtered.

“Then what do you want?” Mac was as calm as a windless sea. “Why are you here?”

I didn’t know how to answer. I just stood there looking at his bare chest – dumb as a rock. “I want–” I mumbled. “I was wondering–” I looked directly into those teasing blue eyes. “Do you have a place where we could lie down?”

First Impressions

When I crossed the threshold of that little trailer, my life changed. I had a secret, one I had to hide, one that Walt, my boss, would never understand. I was hired to be a role model for teenagers. Those who made decisions about my career would certainly question the example I set by spending time alone with a married man.

During the last week in August, I kept busy at the Curry County Fair. I learned the rules for 4-H contests, and I played hostess to judges who knew more about the fair than I did. I supervised volunteers including the county sheriff who spent long hours helping me with activities in the 4-H building. I appreciated his strength, I would have had trouble getting everything in place without him, but I felt more comfortable with other volunteers.

One morning, a careless exhibitor spilled chocolate onto every corner of the demonstration table, and I had the job of cleaning it up. When I finished, the table was spotless, but the white dress I had chosen to wear that day was not. I went home to change.

Vera stood at the kitchen counter overseeing a pile of greenery: ferns, dahlias, huckleberry, and baby's breath. She was assembling an arrangement for her bridge club and another sat on the sideboard ready for the county fair. Her age-spotted hands poked and prodded errant stems. She didn't look up when I came into the room. "You're home early," she said.

"I had to change my dress."

She glanced my way. "Oh my! I guess so!" Her attention went back to her arrangement. "A touch of eucalyptus would look nice right here, don't you think?" Vera stood back, giving me the full view of her masterpiece.

"Your eye is better than mine," I said, adjusting my glasses. "It looks great to me."

She opened her mouth to speak, but instead, she poked a sprig of huckleberry into the vase.

"Something else?" I asked.

She continued to clip and arrange. I watched her through fronds of sward fern. Her face was hidden behind a mosaic of green when she finally spoke.

"It's none of my business," she said.

"What's none of your business?"

"Oh nothing." She turned the vase and worked the opposite side.

I smiled. "Now Vera, you're not usually shy about speaking your mind. What's up?"

She stopped and looked me in the eye. "My bridge club wants to know why your family isn't with you. I told them you wouldn't be here long enough."

"That's right. They're all involved in activities back home, and they didn't want to relocate for so short a time." Vera's question made me feel uneasy. I wanted to end that conversation before I said more than I intended. "Hey, would love to chat, but I need to get back to the fair."

I grabbed a clean towel and hit the shower. Under the stream of warm water, I reflected on my situation. Vera's friends and those like them were curious about the new 4-H agent. They were ready to size her up and make decisions about her ability based on what they saw. They could see that I was no youngster, but I had taken care of myself. Some people might find my appearance provocative, another reason why I must behave myself in public.

I had no intention of telling anyone I was getting a divorce. I had nothing to hide, but I didn't know how to explain my situation so that others would understand. I had married the boy next door and had two wonderful teenaged children. I had enough to eat. I wasn't abused; neglected, yes, but not abused. On the surface, I had nothing to complain about.

Under the idyllic facade, years of suppression had chafed my ego until I wanted to escape the confines of my marriage. My husband had long ago chosen alcohol as his first love. His preferred companions were a six-pack of beer and a fishing pole. I took care of the kids and the house and had dinner on the table at six. I accepted that as my way of life for twenty years. With one child in college and the other in high school, it was my turn to grow up, get a job, and establish an identity of my own. Once I did that, there'd be no reason to stay married.

When the job in Gold Beach came up, I thought about it for a long time. It was temporary, a nine-month position, but the personnel officer assured me that I would be given a permanent assignment if people in Curry County liked my work. It didn't take a private eye to figure out that Walt, my county supervisor, was the person I needed to impress. He seemed like a decent person, but he had the reputation of

being Mr. Straight Laced. I had to show my pristine side to get his support. I could do that. I signed on the line and became the 4-H Extension Agent for Oregon State University in Curry County.

The county fair went by without a hitch, and I collapsed each night exhausted but happy. But when the fair ribbons were packed away and the sounds of the carnival faded, something was missing. I needed a friend, a male friend. I stopped by Mac's trailer on the way home from work. He seemed as happy to see me as I was to see a human who didn't care whether or not I knew the latest method for canning applesauce.

"You're a sight for sore eyes." He hugged me and buried his nose in my hair. "You smell good." He fingered a curl that had fallen from its rightful place. "Always liked chestnut colored hair."

Being next to Mac felt as natural as breathing. "Thank you," I said. "I like compliments."

Mac smiled as though he knew something I didn't. He was different from people in my social circle. I didn't know what to expect from him, and I had to be alert or I'd miss something. The challenge made me feel alive.

He poured a glass of wine for each of us, and we sat back to relax.

"Would you like to go out for dinner?" he asked. "I'd offer you something here, but I need to go shopping."

Someone might recognize me in a restaurant, and it would get back to Walt. I couldn't let that happen. "Maybe another time," I said. "Vera is expecting me to eat with her tonight." I finished my drink, kissed Mac on the cheek, and went home.

I wasn't good company for Vera that evening. I excused myself early and went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. The memory of Mac twisting a lock of my hair around his finger kept me awake.

The next day, I taught a lesson in meal management and took the leftovers plus some items I bought at the store to Mac's trailer. He treated the goodies like a child discovering the delights in a Christmas stocking. Instead of waiting for me to put a meal together, Mac opened containers and began sampling. "I didn't know you could cook like this," Mac said, licking his fingers. "Any more of those marinated shrimp?"

I double checked the containers. "Nope. You ate them all."

"Damn! They were good! What else is in that bag?

"Vegetables for a salad."

"Good! Any time you want to bring me a care package, come ahead," he said. "I enjoy home cooking. My neighbor in Phoenix is a chef, and I've been known to host a neighborhood barbecue just to eat his food."

When Mac made reference to Phoenix, I had visions of Jeanette sitting on their covered patio eating caviar. I wondered why she didn't travel with him. "Do you have kids, Mac?"

"If you mean baby goats, no." He grinned at me, "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

I unloaded the sack of groceries and began chopping vegetables. Mac watched my every move, apparently fascinated with my ability to use a chef's knife. I put the salads in individual bowls, served them, and sat down to eat.

"I think so," Mac said.

"You think so what?"

"I think I have children."

"Don't you know?"

"A woman knows she has children. A man thinks he has."

The implications of his statement conjured up all kinds of scenarios.

"I've never practiced any kind of birth control. My fourth wife..."

"Fourth wife?"

"Yes, Jeanette is my fifth."

I didn't know what to think. Mac had a lot of history I knew nothing about.

"Ida, my fourth wife, gave me two children. The girl looks like me and the boy doesn't. What's more, I wasn't around when he was conceived, but legally they are both mine, and I supported them until they were eighteen." Mac's voice was flat and factual. "The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, moves on."

The quotation sounded familiar. "What's that from?"

"Omar Khayyam. The *Rubaiyat*."

"I like it, and it's true. I didn't know you were a connoisseur of the classics." I looked at Mac with new respect.

"I'm not educated like you, but I read. I especially like Shakespeare. I have favorite passages that I have read over and over."

I had taken Shakespeare in college and barely passed the course. I admired anyone who understood it well enough to enjoy it.

"They're adults now," he said.

"Who?"

"My children. The girl's married with two boys of her own."

"So you're a grandpa?"

"No, I'm too young to be a grandpa. I'm Mac, their mother's father." His eyes danced in amusement.

"And the boy. Is he married?"

Mac looked away. "No!" he snapped.

His sudden mood change startled me. It was like he had flipped a switch. I couldn't imagine feeling so negative about either of my children, but I knew better than ask more questions.

Mac poured a créme-de-menthe, and I stashed the empty food containers into a trash bag. "I'll put these in your garbage can, if that's all right."

He got up and opened the door, gallantly bowing. "Anything for you, my lady."

He made an arch with his arm and when I came back up the step, he caught me. "You're my slave, now. You must cook for me every day." He wrapped his arms around me and I played captive. While he held me, the playful mood escalated. Mac's kisses turned my insides to boiling insanity, and my body came alive with his touch. He waltzed me toward his bed. "One two three, one two three," he crooned in my ear. Clothing went in all directions. Skin touched skin. Mac's mouth explored my body – everywhere. I had never been loved like that, and I liked it.

After being ravaged by the most skillful lover of my experience, I opened my eyes to the picture of Jeanette staring at me from the far end of the trailer. Reality shocked me into action. "I have to go," I said reaching for my clothes. I clinched my teeth to control the panic growing inside.

"Stay here. I'll be good." Mac smirked and ran his hand across my thigh. "Real good."

"I've been here too long already." I nodded in the direction of the picture. "I don't want her or anybody else to catch us in bed, and somebody's going to see my car."

"Jeanette won't be coming here." Mac slipped into a robe and sat on the edge of the bed, looking grim. "She likes her house in Phoenix." He took a letter from behind the pillow. The large flourishes in the handwriting marked the sender as an artistic sort. He waved the envelope under my nose. "And she wants more money. I send her a grand a month, but she says that isn't enough."

A grand a month was more than I was making, and I too wondered why his wife needed additional money.

"She says she had to go to work to pay the bills." Mac's face was getting red and he seemed more agitated by the minute.

"And that's not true?"

"Hell no! Money isn't the reason," he sneered. "She needs something else."

Mac seemed to think I should know what that something else was, but I didn't. "Like what?" I asked.

Mac looked like a man who could kill. "The little cunt took a job with a dentist. Now he's drilling her. It got pretty crowded in Phoenix when I was there in July."

I was shocked. Never before had I heard a man talk in such a hateful way about his wife, the same man who had just made love to me. "I've got to go," I said.

"Why?"

"I just have to."

The bare walls of my room and telephone calls to my children didn't fill the emptiness of living alone. Vera was nice, but she was my landlady, and she had a full life without me. Besides, she knew everyone in town, she talked, and I hesitated to confide in her.

While lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, I analyzed Mac's angry outburst. Was his hot temper typical of laboring men? I had lived my entire life in a sterile atmosphere where I had not learned much about people, especially people like Mac who moved from job to job.

If what he said was true, he had good reason for being upset with Jeanette. It took me the rest of the week to process the new information. Once I rationalized that Mac's anger was justified, I went back to the trailer. I sat under the monkey tree quite a while before getting out of my car and knocking on his door. The minute I saw him, all apprehension vanished and sizzling passion took over, just like it had the first time I stepped over that threshold.

That's how it began. Soon we fell into a pattern: I stopped to see Mac every day after work. Some days I'd bring food. Other days, I'd stay just long enough to share the happenings of the day. We often spent steamy minutes in bed, but I always went home before ten.

One afternoon, I was frying pork chops, and Mac was in the shower when someone knocked. I panicked. Anyone could be there. I was so afraid of being found out that I froze. The knock came louder and a man's voice hollered, "Come on, Mac. Open the goddamned door for Christ's sake."

I wanted to hide.

Mac must have picked up on my hysteria for he called from the bathroom, "It's John. He's okay. Let him in."

I opened the door, and a three-hundred-pound man in greasy coveralls stared at me. He examined every detail of my body with hungry eyes. Although I was fully dressed, I felt exposed. I retreated into the far corner of the limited space. When Mac came out of the shower wrapped in a dripping towel, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Jesus, Mac," John said, grinning like a kid peeking through a keyhole. "Get dressed. You're embarrassing the lady."

Mac ignored him. "What kind of trouble are you in this time?"

"No trouble. Brought the money." John handed Mac a brown paper bag. "Thanks man."

"Anytime," Mac said.

John looked at me. "Sweeten him up, honey, and maybe he won't be such a bastard to work for tomorrow." John shut the door leaving the stench of diesel fuel and human sweat behind.

My perplexity must have shown because Mac hastened to explain, "Bail money. John got a little too friendly with a married lady, and her husband got him arrested."

"I remember."

"Happens all the time. Construction workers come to a little town like Gold Beach and they start hitting on the women. When my men get busted, I bail them out."

"Why the brown paper bag?"

"We're Teamsters, and this crew just finished a job in New Jersey where they paid us in cash."

"You're kidding!"

"No, dead serious. In Jersey, it was all under the table. Jeanette loved it. Meant more money for her and less for the IRS."

I didn't know whether to believe him or not. I had opened my first bank account before I went to college, and I couldn't imagine filing a tax return knowing that some of my income had not been accounted for.

"My men like cash," Mac explained, "because there's nothing like a handful of C-notes to get the cooperation of a curious woman."

I had to think about that tidbit of information. My reaction to the wad of bills Mac flashed the first night we met must have been just what he anticipated.

"Don't the wives object to the girlfriends?" I served the pork chops and sat down opposite Mac.

"Some do, but most don't because they're screwing someone back home. Don't worry about them, sweetheart. They know how the game is played, and as long as they get enough money, they don't mind."

"Mac, are you this blunt with all your girlfriends?"

"No." He cut into his chop. "Patricia, back at the Village Green, you had me figured out five seconds after we met. I could see it in your eyes. I'd make a move, and you'd give me a look that said you weren't buying it, so I backed off. I figured I had to play it straight with you or I wouldn't be playing at all."

"Do you still feel that way?"

"More so now than ever. You're not afraid to go after what you want." His eyes narrowed. "You're all woman, and I like that, but you're a woman with a tough mind. You think like a man, and that worries me."

I didn't know whether to take Mac's observation as a compliment or a criticism so I just listened.

"I know better than to mess with you, and I promise I'll be straight with you as long as we're together. We can have fun, but you might as well know right now, I'll never tell you I love you."

His eyes left mine and his thoughts went somewhere that didn't include me. "I can't. I've used up my quota."

Mac chuckled but the laughter was bitter. "I've known too many women."

He looked me in the eye. "I heard a buddy tell a new hire, 'You can trust Mac with anything except your wife.' That hurt."

Mac had never been subtle, but this time he laid it all out, naked and bleeding. Our relationship would come to an end when our jobs did, but every time I looked at the picture of Jeanette, every time I saw the collection of letters with the elaborate handwriting, I felt something akin to jealousy. Mac had a home in Phoenix, a place to return to once the job ended. I had left my home. I couldn't go back.

Stepping Out

I was so afraid that somebody would recognize us that we didn't go out often. There wasn't much to do in Gold Beach anyway, but when Mac proposed a Friday night outing to Brookings, that sounded like a welcome change. I didn't know people there, so I agreed to go.

To prepare for the event, Mac meticulously detailed the inside of his car. I sat on the trailer steps and watched him stroke and polish the shiny black Lincoln with as much attention to the intricacies of her body as he did to mine. Every touch and stroke was that of a lover, and his commitment to her was more than he could give to any woman, at least more than he could give to me.

When the chrome shone like a mirror and the glass appeared transparent, a slight upward curve came to his lips and his eyes glistened with pride. He had removed every streak and spot, shampooed every inch of leather, and vacuumed every grain of sand from the mats. Only after his standards of perfection had been met did he take my arm and usher me to the passenger side of his prized Lincoln. I luxuriated in the freshly conditioned bucket seats. Mac positioned himself behind the wheel and reviewed the panel of gauges like a pilot in preflight.

A strong antiseptic order stung my eyes. "What's the smell?"

"Camphor blocks. I put them in the ashtray. Cuts the smell of cigarette smoke," he said. "If I weren't so weak willed, I'd quit."

We left Gold Beach and headed south. Mac's attention focused on his driving and he appeared to have forgotten that I was present. The Mark IV took to the road like a racehorse to the track. Once out of town, Mac accelerated the Lincoln to eighty, to ninety, then ninety-five over a roller coaster road of hills and valleys.

Flashes of spectacular seascapes and giant evergreens blurred into nightmarish streaks. The road floated above the ocean like a gray ribbon whipping in the wind. I was petrified, but I wasn't about to let Mac know. I clenched my fist.

The Lincoln approached one hundred miles an hour on a two-lane road with jackknife curves. I clicked my seat belt and prayed. Mac threaded the Lincoln between cars, shaved the curves approaching Cape Sebastian, and flew over the Pistol River Bridge. He cursed the slow driver in his path. I closed my eyes and begged the gods for another day.

Quite suddenly, at the entrance to the Boardman State Park, Mac pulled to the shoulder of the road and stopped. He reached over and took my hand. "What's wrong, sweetheart? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"This is a public highway," I sputtered, "and you're driving as though it were a racetrack." I'd be damned if I'd let him think I was frightened, although he probably saw it on my face.

Mac snickered. "Hey, I know what I'm doing. I've been driving race cars since I was sixteen," He took my hand and squeezed it gently, "but I didn't mean to scare you."

I wanted to believe him. “I’m not questioning your ability to drive. I’m pointing out that this is a public highway, subject to the laws of the road.”

“Laws are for people who don’t know how to drive,” he said. “I do.” Mac flipped the glove box open and retrieved a stack of speeding tickets that had been rubber-banded and stuffed to the back. “See these? The highway patrol doesn’t see my point either, but I didn’t buy this car to drive fifty-five.”

We compromised, and for the remainder of the trip we cruised at just under eighty with Mac scrutinizing the bridges and fences for possible concealed police cars.

Another concealed object was on my mind. When Mac opened the glove box, I saw a leather holster holding a handgun. Who was this man who thumbed his nose at the rules and carried a weapon?

We went through Brookings and took the south Jetty to the mouth of the Chetco River. We stopped at Smuggler’s Cove, a dimly lit establishment on the waterfront. The waiter seated us in a section with windows where we could see the lights on the late arriving fishing boats coming up the river. White tablecloths, candlelight, black tie waiters, and a carnation on every table punctuated the elegance of the enterprise. I had never been in a restaurant as fancy as the Cove, and I felt conspicuous. “Isn’t this place terribly expensive?” I looked around, half expecting someone to tell me I was doing something wrong.

Mac seemed to be completely at home. “We go first class or not at all,” he said.

His confidence gave me confidence, and I felt like a princess. Mesmerized by Mac's street-smart charm and his apparent never-ending source of cash, I ignored caution and enjoyed myself.

We ate our meal and lingered, watching dancers swing and sway. The band played a familiar piece and Mac took my arm and escorted me to the floor. We waltzed like we had been dancing together for years, the strains of a popular song guiding our movements.

"What's the name of that tune?" I asked.

"That's Lara's theme – from the movie *Dr. Zhivago*." Mac sang with the music. "Somewhere my love," he crooned. "Lara falls in love, and then her lover is taken away." Mac twirled me under his arm in formal ballroom style, but the tender strains of the waltz and the ambiance of the surroundings called for something more intimate. Mac dropped the formal position, and we danced closer and closer.

Back at our table, I thought about Lara and what it must have been like for her to be have been separated from the man she loved. I looked up and recognized a dancer on the floor. About the time I saw her, she saw me. "Mac," I whispered. "I know that woman." I wanted to crawl under the table, but it was too late. The music stopped, and she and her companion headed straight for us. I was so nervous that my bladder threatened to lose control.

"Hi, Pat," she said. "Having a good time?"

I didn't know how to act. I felt like I had been caught in the spotlight with a microphone in my face. I had tried so hard to keep Mac a secret, and Beverly was the worst possible person to discover us. She'd have the news spread around town by sunrise.

Mac stood up and extended his hand in greeting. "Good evening," he said. He spoke with the finesse of a talk show host. "Excellent dance band, don't you agree?" He turned to me. "Introduce me to your friend, Patricia."

I stuttered and stammered until the words came out of my tongue-tied mouth. "Why Beverly, imagine meeting you here. This is my friend, Mac."

Beverly nearly shouted. "You're the last person I expected to see here," and in my mind I finished her sentence: with a man who is not your husband.

Mac helped me stand. "We need to be going," he said. "It was nice meeting you." Beverly and her companion watched as Mac escorted me outside.

"I acted like a fool in there," I said.

"I'm so sorry that had to happen. I didn't know how to help you. You were paralyzed."

"She works in the courthouse, down the hall from me. By Monday morning everyone in my office will know we were here."

Mac took my hand. "It happened. You'll live through it."

"But if Walt finds out, I'll lose my job."

Mac tried to comfort me, but my stomach churned and I felt as brittle as a stick. I dreaded Monday morning. Beverly would point and whisper when she saw me enter the building. I shriveled at the thought of Walt's talk, and the note he'd write for my file. The monsters of my imagination filled my head with one humiliating scene after another.

Mac took my arm and walked me to the car. He opened the door, but I balked. Hot angry tears filled my eyes. I shook, not

understanding the source of my anger. “I don’t want another hair raising ride. Just leave me here.”

Mac bristled. “That’s up to you.” He dropped my arm and went to the driver’s side of the car. I looked across the shadowy parking lot. Sanity rushed back and I climbed into the car and slammed the door.

He smiled. “I’ll keep it under seventy.”

I felt patronized. I clenched my fist but held my tongue.

When we returned to the trailer, Mac found a note on the door left by the landlady. He went to the office and came back ten minutes later looking like a black cloud ready to rain on our weekend. “I have to go to Phoenix,” he said. “I’ll be back Monday.”

He ignored me and began packing.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s not about you,” he said. “You should go home.”

I felt rejected. As close as we had been, I expected at least a one-liner explanation, but I could tell that I wasn’t going to get it. I went to Vera’s house and waited.

Monday’s work was a disaster. Although nobody said a word, I was sure Beverly had told everyone about seeing me with Mac. I imagined the gossip mill to be working in the shadows, ready to expose me at any time. In addition to that, I expected Mac to return some time that day, but he didn’t. Nor did he return the next day. I had begun to wonder if he had decided to stay in Phoenix, but on Wednesday, after work, he tracked me down in the parking garage below my office building. I had the urge to hug him, but Mac didn’t

seem receptive. He jumped out of his car and slammed the door. His voice rose in anger. “Let me show you something.” He marched to the opposite side of the car. I followed. “See that.” His words bounced off the concrete walls.

I stared. Someone had taken a key or a nail and gouged the paint down to the raw metal the full length of the car. “It happened in Phoenix,” he said. He looked like he might cry, but of course, a man like Mac doesn’t cry.

“My Mark’s ruined. It will take a paint job to fix that gouge.”

I had the feeling that more than the car had been ruined that weekend. “Let’s go to your place and talk,” I suggested.

At his trailer, Mac had several drinks before he began to loosen up. With elbows on the table and his head in his hands he said, “I almost didn’t come back. I stopped just outside Phoenix, and I looked over my shoulder, back at the city, asking myself, ‘How could she?’ I felt sorry for myself, started thinking dark thoughts. I’ll kill myself. That will show her. I could have ended it right there, but what would that prove? She wouldn’t care. It might be a relief to her.”

Mac paused, and then he filled his glass with more whiskey. After drinking down the contents of the glass, he continued. “I took the Colt Commander out of the glove box and turned it over and over in my hand. I wondered who would find me, how long it’d be before she’d know.”

I listened to Mac’s story, remembering the long days without him, wishing he would return, concerned that the situation in Phoenix might change our relationship. If Mac had not returned, I wouldn’t have thought about him being blown apart along some isolated road

in the desert. “Mac, I wouldn’t have known. Nobody would have told me.”

His eyes met mine. “I thought about that. That’s why I came back.”

“Take the gun out of the car, Mac. For me.”

“No,” he said. “I need to know it’s there.”

Secrets

One Saturday morning in October, smells of something delicious curled through the cracks of my bedroom door and opened my eyes. It had been a month since Beverly had seen me at the Smuggler's Cove. Nothing had changed and I relaxed, concluding that she chose to keep her venomous secret to herself.

Vera knocked. "I have breakfast ready. Care to join me?"

"Sure, give me a minute to dress."

"Come as you are, or the food will get cold."

I stumbled to the kitchen in my nightclothes. Vera wore a clean cotton housedress with a white apron wrapped around her ample middle. Delicious smells filled the kitchen when she opened the oven door to remove a sheet of homemade scones.

We carried the food to the dining room, a room with lace curtains and turn-of-the-century furniture. Vera had pulled open the panels on the west windows, exposing a view of the Pacific Ocean and the rooftops of Gold Beach, spectacular on that cloud-free October morning. Mac and I had planned a walk on the beach, and I was thinking more about him than about Vera's elaborate eggs and scones. I made appropriate responses to her casual conversation until she said, "You don't see your husband very often. If you'd like to invite him to come here, you could use the guest room."

I nearly choked on a scone. She watched me fidget. I wished she'd think of a juicy bit of scandal about somebody else, but she continued to hold me in her gaze like a pinned insect. Finally, she said, "What's going on? I think I should know."

I had no heart for a lie. "We're divorced," I said. "Filed before I came here."

Vera calmly poured another cup of tea, apparently not surprised by my shocking revelation.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked.

"I didn't tell anyone. I didn't want Walt to find out. He wouldn't have hired me if he had known."

Vera nodded as if contemplating the wisdom of that decision. "He might not like it, Pat, but you should tell him. There's not much he can do about your divorce. If he thinks you're married and seeing another man, he could cause you a lot of grief."

I must have turned seven shades of red.

Vera patted my hand. "Yes, I know," she said kindly. "Everybody in town knows – that is everybody I know, knows." Vera went to the refrigerator for another jar of homemade apple jelly. "You might as well come clean." She grinned. "Tell me all. I'm not too old to appreciate a good love story."

I marveled at this old gal's observation skills. Who told her? Beverly?

"Yes, I have met a man. He's with the construction company that's building the power line to the beach. It's not love, but he is very nice."

"Not love?" She raised a painted eyebrow. "Well then, what is it?"

I turned her question inward. Why did I eagerly anticipate the frequent visits to the tiny trailer? What did I want from Mac and why? Deception was not me, but who was I? For twenty years I had been a wife, a role determined by a husband. He chose my friends, told me what to think, and defined my social life. It took all my courage to file for divorce, and now I was free, but free to do what, to be whom? Mac let me discover the person I had hidden inside, a person I didn't know. He made no judgments; there were no commitments, no expectations. Getting to know Mac was getting to know myself, and I liked this new person, this butterfly emerging from the travel trailer cocoon.

On May fifteenth, my temporary appointment would end, I would take a fresh self-concept to a new assignment, and Mac would return to Phoenix when the power-line project ended. I had no secret to hold me back. I could do anything I wanted to do.

Mac was right about Jeanette. She never did show up in Gold Beach. After his trip to Phoenix, he didn't say much about her, but he sent a money order each payday.

A few days after the breakfast with Vera, when I arrived at the trailer, Mac was dressed to go out. "I'm going to meet some people and take care of a little business. You're welcome to come along if you'd like." Since everybody in Gold Beach knew about us anyway, I decided it could do no further harm to be seen with Mac.

We met his friends at a fisherman's dive on the mouth of the Rogue River called the Top Deck Cafè, a sandwich shop on the second floor of a square building with windows facing the Pacific Ocean. Patrons drank coffee, ate Danish, and watched the sport

fishing boats come over the river's bar. A shortwave radio blared the catches of the hour, and the charter boats eased against the dock below the eatery. Excited tourists held their catches high for the cameras while customers in the cafè told stories about the big one that got away.

Mac's friends were waiting at a table overlooking the dock. The man was round with the paunch of a beer drinker, a shiny bald head, a bulbous nose, and a mouth full of ill-fitting false teeth. The woman was about twenty years older than I but wearing her age well, small and rather attractive. Her knit shift, although the fashion of the day, was more appropriate for a quilting bee than the Top Deck Cafè.

"Patricia, I want you to meet Clyde and Clara. They came down from Portland." Mac gave Clara a hug; the kind one gives a grand old aunt.

At first, I disliked her. I don't usually have such strong feelings, but she resembled the picture of Jeanette. That wasn't her fault, so I suppressed my first impression.

Mac and Clyde discussed the power line project, and the shortwave radio blared in our ears. Clara leaned over to me and said, "If that radio announces another amazing catch, I'll gag. Let's get out of here and leave the men to talk."

I welcomed the escape. On the stairs, gusty winds messed our hair and tore at our clothing. We ducked into the charter boat office below the cafè. On the left, a man wearing a white shirt and tie sold tickets and bait. On the right, a woman in coveralls painted designs on t-shirts and hung them up for sale. Clara and I looked over her selection and left the display with one hand-painted shirt for each of us.

The wind blew sand in our faces and we leaned against the building for protection. From my perspective, I could see into the recessed doorway to the restaurant's storage. In the shadow of the dark entrance, I saw a large man who appeared to be talking to someone I couldn't see. He stepped back and looked my way. I recognized him. He was the greasy man who brought Mac money in a brown paper bag. He looked over his shoulder, apparently to see who was around, and stepped back. A small woman covered her head with a scarf and moved in the shadow of the building to a car parked in the back. The man went the opposite way and stood on the dock as if waiting for one of the boats to come in.

"I'll have to tell Mac that I saw a friend of his," I said.

"Who's that?"

"That man over there." I pointed. "I've forgotten his name."

Like the mysterious woman, Clara covered her head against the blowing sand. "This may not have been such a good idea," she said.

"It's better than the shortwave radio." I moved to the warm space between the charter boat office and the stairs to the cafè. The wind was just a breeze in that protected spot. We stood there, enjoying the smell of salt air.

Clara proved to be a charming woman who could smalltalk me into oblivion. By the time we felt the need to join our men, I knew nothing more about Clara than her ability to fill the air with a clutter of meaningless words. Nonetheless, I liked her.

Mac stood red-faced next to the table. I heard Clyde say, "I'm sorry I was the one to tell you."

Mac grasped my arm and we scurried out of the cafè and down the steps. He didn't say a word. His eyes narrowed and his lips were so tight that only a down-sloping curve remained. While driving home, he looked straight ahead, barely stopping at the stop signs. I wanted to tell him that I had seen his friend, but I knew this was not the time. He'd be lucky to avoid a ticket for reckless driving.

He parked the Lincoln near the monkey tree. "Stay in the car," Mac ordered. He rushed to the trailer and nearly ripped the hinges off the door. He tore Jeanette's picture from the wall, turned, and threw it through the open space into the trunk of the monkey tree. The glass shattered, the frame skewed, and Jeanette's smiling face looked up from the ground. Mac stomped the face into a wrinkle of cracked canvas. The landlady stepped outside her office door, watched from her stoop, returned inside, and peered through a crack in her blinds.

After a while, Mac stopped, stood frozen, staring at the debris. He knelt down, picked up the stomped and tattered portrait, and held it to his chest. The air was still. The crack in the landlady's blinds closed. I didn't move. After a frozen pause in time, Mac stood, turned, took two steps to the trash can, lifted the lid, and dropped the remains of the picture into its final resting place.

The tantrum was over. I allowed myself to breathe.

Mac opened the car door for me and we went inside.

With robot-like movements, he poured a drink. I sat. After several minutes of listening to ice clinking, Mac spoke. "I don't need a picture of another man's wife on my wall."

"What?"

"Jeanette's remarried."

"What are you talking about?"

"Jeanette married her dentist the day our divorce was final."

"You're divorced?"

"Since October first. She did the same thing with me three years ago." He sat opposite me in the shadows.

I had known that Mac's marriage was in trouble, but he had said nothing about divorce.

"She got everything. I'm wiped out, broke."

I had learned too much too fast. "I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"When I went to Phoenix, my attorney did his best to save a few investments, but Jeanette claimed abandonment, and the judge felt sorry for her. He awarded her a grand a month alimony plus everything we owned together. That's why she needed more money. She expects to live on my income for the rest of her life. At fifty-seven I have this trailer, the Mark IV, veteran's disability, and what's left of my wages. I'm essentially broke." He held his head in his hands and leaned on the table. "When I was a kid, we were poor, and I vowed that I'd kill myself rather than live poor again."

I remembered the day he came back from Phoenix and told me about his thoughts of suicide. "There are worse things than being poor," I said.

"Name one."

"Lots of things." At that point I couldn't think of a single example that would make sense to Mac.

"Nothing's worse than being poor, unless it's being poor and old and sick." He moved to my side of the table, put his hand on my shoulder, and spoke gently, "I've put you through hell, haven't I?"

"In a way."

"There's one good thing about this."

"What's that?"

"Since she's remarried, I won't have to pay the alimony. I'll be able to keep that grand a month."

I smiled. Leave it to Mac to count his money in the midst of an emotional meltdown.

"How did you learn that she remarried?"

"Jeanette was afraid to tell me, but Clyde thought I should know. Clyde and Clara are–" he stopped and reframed his response, "…were my in-laws."

I wasn't sure I heard right. "Did you say in-laws?"

"Yep."

"Why would they do that for you?"

"Clyde and Clara were friends before I married Jeanette. They know their daughter. Maybe they feel sorry for me."

I had nearly forgotten about Beverly and my fear of getting in trouble, but the following Monday morning slapped those memories awake.

"You wanted to see me?" I stood in the doorway of Walt's office. The receptionist told me that he was waiting for me.

Walt sat behind his desk, pouring over a stack of files. He seemed too big for the tiny office, like a giant stuffed animal in a child's chair. The leather elbow patch on his brown tweed jacket had worn thin, showing the stresses of time. Walt had worn thin as well. Strands of cork colored hair slid forward, exposing a shiny bald spot. "Come in," he said. "We need to talk."

My knees shook and I grabbed the back of a chair for support. I wanted to sit down; but all surfaces in that room, including the chairs, were covered with boxes, books, files, and unclaimed 4-H projects.

"I've been talking to the marine science people at Oregon State," he began, "and they want the Extension Service to do a consumer education program in Curry County. You have a degree in foods, don't you?"

"Yes, in general home economics, but my emphasis was in foods."

"That's what I thought. We want you to do a series of demonstrations using shellfish. OSU will provide your supplies and printed materials, but you'll need to find places for the demonstrations, publicize the events, and work with the local Fishermen's Wives to promote the program. An endorsement from that group will be what you need to get a permanent position." Walt sifted through his outbox. "Here's a list of contacts."

He handed me three pages of names and addresses.

"The county agent you're filling in for was in last week. She's looking forward to returning in May, and she likes the way you've organized her office."

"Thanks, I was afraid my systems might not work for her."

"No, she likes it." Walt focused on the open file before him. I wondered if it was my personnel file. What had he written?

He saw me shift my weight. "Sorry about the chairs. My office is always temporary storage after State Fair. Just one more thing and I'll let you go."

I sucked in air. This was it. My reprimand.

"I hate to tell you this," he began. I closed my eyes and clenched my fists. "Oregon State is getting picky about reimbursement. Be careful about what you list as an expense. Check the revised guidelines before you submit your next reimbursement request." I opened my eyes. He handed me a new form with blanks to fill in on both sides.

"That's all," he said.

I blinked. No reprimand? I exhaled enough nervous energy to make the dust on the piles of 4-H projects vibrate. I had my work cut out for me. I could see my days getting hectic, but Walt hadn't mentioned Mac. For that, I was thankful.

Differences

Highway 101 became so familiar that October that I could have driven it in my sleep – which I almost did a time or two. I traveled between Langlois and Harbor three days a week, coordinating workshops with the Fishermen's Wives. As I drove, I observed the rolling Pacific, cutting its message into the shoreline. In my own small way, I was cutting my own message into the minds of Curry County consumers. Increased sales at local fish markets reflected my efforts, and Walt was pleased.

Mac's work had stepped up too, and we didn't see much of each other during the week, but Saturday was ours, along with our laundry. I had completed mine and was folding the last of my socks when Mac drove up to the curb in front of the laundromat. I could see and hear him clearly through the open door. He didn't notice me because a girl on a bike had his attention. She was about thirteen, rust-colored hair, freckled, and shaped like a double-D fashion model. He got out of the car and opened the trunk while watching her approach. She dropped her bike at the curb behind Mac's car, leaned over and pressed her palms and nose against the car window. "Hey mister, I like your car. Take me for a ride?"

Her elastic pants and halter-top revealed all the law allowed, and Mac was looking. "That sounds like fun, sugar, but aren't you a little young?"

"I'm eighteen. Old enough."

"Sure you are! Just talking to you could get me arrested. Get on your bike and peddle your hot little ass somewhere else."

The girl looked disappointed, but she picked up her bike. "Twenty, one way; forty, two ways."

"Not interested!"

She shrugged and got on her bike and rode up the hill.

Mac watched until she turned a corner and disappeared between houses near the end of the block. I wondered if he would tell me about the girl, so I didn't let on that I had been an observer. When he came inside with his laundry, I met him at the door. "Good morning, sleepyhead," I picked up my basket of folded clothing.

"Are you finished already?

"I am. Got an early start."

"Good. I'll drop my clothes in the washer then we can get some breakfast."

"Aren't you afraid someone will take your clothes?"

"Anyone who wants six pair of worn-out jeans is welcome to them," he said. "Besides, I'll leave a twenty with the attendant. That's usually enough to secure my belongings."

"Yes, it probably is." On my income, I couldn't afford to pay someone else to do my work, but Mac had plenty of money. Why shouldn't he buy the service?

We took Mac's car to a restaurant at the Indian Creek Resort on the south bank of the Rogue River where the locals discussed last night's football game. Most of the patrons hadn't touched a football for years, but the excitement in the conversation let me know that their team had won.

On the way to our table, we passed some of Mac's men who were having breakfast. Among them was the man I had seen when I was with Clara. "What's that man's name," I asked.

"That's John. He's the one who terrorized you when he came to the trailer."

"Yes, that's him, the sweaty man who smelled like diesel."

"Why?"

"I saw him with a woman the day we met Clyde and Clara at the Top Deck. I intended to tell you, but I didn't get a chance."

"Where'd you see them?"

"Under the stairs."

Mac frowned. "What'd she look like?"

"I couldn't tell. She was in the shadows and had her head covered, but she was small, like a child."

"Damn him!" Mac said. "I wish he'd leave her alone. Somebody's going to get hurt."

"Why do you say that?"

"That woman's married to a man who knocks her around. He had John tossed in jail once. He's likely to go after him again. Maybe I should tell him about the girl on the bicycle. Did you see her?" Mac laughed.

"Yes, I saw her."

"Wasn't she something! Couldn't have been a day over fourteen and already knew how to work the street."

The question had been answered. Yes, Mac would talk about a provocative woman when the topic was relevant.

We found a table and ordered breakfast and coffee. “Let’s go to the beach after breakfast. The weather’s perfect, and I want to do some practice shooting.”

I clenched my teeth. “You want to do what?”

“Check the sights on my gun.”

“Shooting’s illegal on the beach.”

“This time of year, nobody will notice. There won’t be a soul out there, least of all, law enforcement.”

“I hate guns!”

“Hate them or not, you should learn to use one. You’re on the road a lot, and someday, someone’s going to try to mess with you.”

“Perhaps, but if I had a gun, I’d probably shoot myself, or I’d be so inept that the person attacking me would grab it away. I don’t want a gun.”

Mac flashed a knowing smile to assure me that he had great insight about something that I didn’t understand. “I’ll teach you,” he said. “There’s nothing to it.”

While we ate, I attempted to interest Mac in an activity other than shooting, but Mac had his mind set on my lesson. Like it or not, I was going to learn.

With great reluctance, I followed him from his car down the gravel road that took us between the rocks on the jetty to the beach. We walked through the loose sand, to the hard sand near the water, and out on the wet sand. A sneaker wave washed over our feet and we ran back to avoid the next one. Behind us, a small aircraft landed on the Gold Beach airstrip.

"This is a good place," he said. "There's nobody here." He reached under his jacket and took the gun out of its holster.

I didn't want to touch the vile thing.

Mac aimed at a small rock down the beach. He squeezed the trigger and the rock shattered. "Perfect!" he said. "Now you try it."

He slapped the gun against my palm. Reflexively, I closed down on the trigger. The gun went off. I dropped it like it was hot. Shaking with anger, I screamed, "Take that thing away from me, I hate guns!"

Mac leaned over and picked it up, brushing sand from its polished handle. He took his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the sand off the barrel. "Looks like I'll spend the afternoon cleaning this." He grinned, and I saw the three little lines at the corner of his eyes, the lines that went deep when he was amused. "I won't let you near my gun again."

"I'm sorry, but you forced me to do something I didn't want to do."

"I know, and I should have warned you about the hair trigger. This isn't the right gun for you."

"No, gun is right for me."

"You really should learn how to use one. This one's a Colt Commander, known for its quick action. If I ever decided to use it, it wouldn't allow me to think twice. The job will be done."

I was horrified. "Why do you think you need a gun?"

"Several reasons. I work with people who get rough. They drink too much, talk too much, and have a habit of picking fights. They know I carry a gun, and that puts distance between me and the trouble makers."

"Has anyone actually attacked you?"

"Yep. See this scar." Mac turned his left hand upward revealing a four inch white line across his palm. A black gentleman and I had a difference of opinion. I stopped his knife with my left and reached for my gun with the right. When he saw the gun, he ran."

"That sounds awful. Have you ever shot anyone?"

"No, and I hope I never do."

We left the wet sand and cut across the beach to Mac's car. It was clear that both of us considered the lesson complete.

That afternoon, Mac cleaned and polished individual parts of his gun, leaving not a single grain of sand behind. I sat patiently and watched the cleaning experience because I felt responsible for the sand in the barrel. I knew enough about guns to know that wasn't good.

After twiddling my thumbs for about an hour, I considered excusing myself and going home, and then I remembered that my car was parked at the laundromat. "Mac, did you forget about your laundry?"

He looked up. "Damn! Yes, I did." He clicked the last piece in place and put the gun away. "Let's go."

We hiked across the highway to the laundromat. I waited outside while Mac dealt with the attendant. I could see through the window that she was annoyed, but Mac's laundry had been dried, folded, and loaded into his basket. He gave her another bill and said something to her that made her smile. He could charm his way out of anything.

Fair weather October gave way to furious November. Horizontal rains attacked the little trailer and daylight gave way to darkness. The nastiness of the weather brought out the worst in us. Mac's project had fallen behind schedule, and the seafood demonstrations demanded more of me than I had to give. We were both very tired and quick to anger.

Mac arrived at the trailer at seven, three hours later than his usual time. I was completing a reimbursement form when the Lincoln's headlights shown through the window. Covered with mud and snarling like a feral dog, Mac crossed the threshold, cursing. "Lazy pricks! Farting around the shack. Quit because of a god dammed little drizzle. You'd think they'd never seen rain before." Mac threw his hardhat into the corner. I just looked at him with my mouth open, not quite believing what I heard. "Can you blame them? I was almost blown away just getting the mail. Working outside in this weather must be dangerous."

"Of course it's dangerous." Mac faced me. "It's hell!"

"Then why work? I don't understand."

"We expected a few more good weeks, but it hasn't stopped raining in ten days. The ground is slippery as snot, and when a serpentine layer of soil gets soaked, it slides and the hillside comes with it.

"Freezing fog moved in on us this morning. John was up in a tower when he saw that it was icing up. He got the hell down, but if he'd stayed a minute longer, he would've been in trouble. Rain's better than that stuff." Mac stood over me, venting.

"Couldn't you wait for better weather? Why work in this?" I motioned to the rain pounding the window.

Mac's eyes narrowed and he leaned over me and snarled, "Because people like you demand electricity at the flip of a switch, even if you live on a rock in the middle of the Pacific. Because the completion date is looming, and we're behind schedule. Because the owners are hot, and the project manager is breathing down my neck."

Mac tossed his shirt in a laundry basket, turned toward the bathroom, stopped, and spun around with an afterthought. "If some idiot gets hurt, the project stops." Sarcasm put an edge on his voice. "The good people who pay the bills don't look kindly on that. Yes, it's dangerous." Mac grabbed a towel and disappeared behind the bathroom door.

I sat dumb, clutching my forearms. Mac had been angry before, but this was the first time he had directed it at me. I relaxed some when I heard the shower running. I had a little time before he'd reappear. I completed the reimbursement form, trusting that soap and water would dissolve Mac's anger.

After fifteen minutes, Mac opened the bathroom door as agitated as before. He walked toward me, rolling up his sleeves. "You probably won't understand, but I work for the money. And you." He grabbed the reimbursement form and fanned it in my face. "You don't even get paid for your meals."

I felt attacked.

"Your entire expense account doesn't cover my bar bill. I'm a skilled electrical worker, came up through the ranks, and I can buy and sell your kind."

I took a deep breath and sat erect. "My kind? Do I fit some stereotype?" I clenched my fist and leaned forward. "Even so, money is no reason to risk somebody's life."

"Oh yes it is!" he yelled. "I learned a long time ago that poor boys don't have much fun, and I have fun."

"Is your fun worth the price?" I lowered my voice, hoping to reduce the tension.

He got in my face, his nose almost touching mine, and snarled, "You sit in your comfortable little office where it's warm and dry because your parents sent you to college." He stood up, his shoulders back. "You don't have to sacrifice your body."

I stared at Mac realizing how little we knew about each other. We couldn't even disagree like adults. I stuffed my expense accounts into my briefcase and snapped it shut. "I should go," I said.

"Yes, you should." Mac turned his back on me and I let myself out.

I avoided Mac for the next few days. The seafood programs kept me busy, so busy that writing December on correspondence seemed like a mistake. One morning, while purchasing supplies, I found a small cross-stitch wall-hanging of a golden moon rising over shadowy mountains. It reminded me of the night Mac and I met. I bought it, wrapped it, and took it to Mac's trailer. When Mac opened the door, powerful tobacco smells flooded my senses.

I cautiously stepped inside. The sparkle in Mac's eye assured me that I was welcome. "For you," I said, handing him the gift. "Don't open it until Christmas."

Mac shook the package and grinned. "It doesn't feel like a bomb. I guess I'm safe." He put the gift on the table amidst piles of tobacco. "Where have you been?" he asked. "I've missed you."

"Been busy." I looked at the table. "What's all this?"

"I know you hate cigarettes, so I'm switching. My doc said the pipe is better for me as long as I don't inhale."

"Didn't your doctor tell you to quit smoking?"

"Yeah. Many times. Telling me doesn't make it happen. Something always torques my jaws and I go back to the vile little crutches."

Mac put his hands on my shoulders, bent over and kissed me on the forehead. In a deep and sincere voice, he said, "I was afraid you wouldn't come back. I acted like an ass."

"Yes, you did."

The verbal apology left much unsaid. Neither Mac nor I graciously admitted to being wrong, and the embers of anger smoldered just below the surface. I felt an urgent need for closure, a need left unmet with apologetic words.

Erotic sensations ran from Mac's body to mine. For a moment, I saw hunger in his eyes. Then he looked down and dropped his hands. I fixed my gaze on his hesitant eyes and unbuttoned my blouse, slowly – ever so slowly. Mac watched. I slid my arms out of sleeves and let the garments fall to the floor; the blouse first and then the skirt.

Mac's mouth hardened. "Tease," he rasped, grabbing my wrist. His groping hands tore the remaining clothing from my body. He pushed me between piles of laundry on his bed, and we dismissed the remaining sparks of disagreement with primitive grunts and moans.

We clung together in silence. I stared at the ceiling. The clock ticked on the shelf above us, but time stood still.

I don't know how long we lay there, but after awhile I began to feel cool. Mac stretched and sat up on the edge of the bed. He looked at the clock. "I need to clean up," he said. "I told John I'd meet him at the Rod-N-Reel in an hour." He dressed and returned to the table, giving me space in the tiny bathroom.

Mac chose a pipe with a cherry wood bowl from his collection. He put the others with bags of tobacco in a metal container and slid it under the bench. He filled his pipe, struck a match, and sucked fire through the tobacco until a smoldering red glow sent its first wisp of smoke upward. He leaned back, puffed contentedly, and watched me comb my hair. When I had done all I could to put myself back together, I sat next to him and drank in his scent: tobacco, cologne, and sex.

"Have you had dinner?" Mac asked.

I shook my head.

"Come with me. I could use your help with John."

"I'd rather not. I didn't like John."

"He can be a gentleman when he wants to be; and he wants to be when he's around Lois."

Is Lois the married woman I saw him with?"

"That's the one. She's pregnant, and John's afraid her husband will kill her when he finds out. The asshole has a history of beating her up."

I buttoned my coat and tucked my purse under my arm.

Mac opened the door. "Let's go."

When we arrived at the Rod-N-Reel, Sheriff Rice was standing on the deck, observing the entrance to the parking lot. When

we passed, he spoke to me. I stopped to exchange a few polite words, but Mac pulled me away. "Come on, Patricia. People are waiting."

"Good seeing you," I said over my shoulder.

Mac tightened his grip on my arm. "You didn't tell me that you and the sheriff were buddies." Mac's jaws were set and the furrow in his brow went deep. His heels snapped against the hardwood floor.

"He's one of my volunteers. It would be rude of me to ignore him."

"I don't have much use for the man," Mac said.

"So I gathered. Why not?"

"I don't like cops, especially him."

I looked back at the sheriff, trying to reconcile my experience with Mac's prejudice.

Mac scowled, ushered me through the door and up to the hostess's stand. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the dimly lit dining room, and the cigarette smoke made my nose run.

After a short wait, the hostess guided us between tables until Mac spotted a couple huddled in the corner. John stood up, and I remembered how huge he was. Sitting next to him was the woman I had seen him with, a slight woman in her thirties with raven hair and moody dark eyes. Mac pulled a chair out for me. I smiled. "You must be Lois," I said. "I'm Patricia, Mac's friend." Makeup covered a purplish bruise across an otherwise flawless peach colored cheek. Her eyes were puffy and sad.

Mac leaned over my shoulder and said, "John and I need a drink. We'll be right back."

At first, Lois and I sat in silence, waiting for the men to return. I forced a social smile. "Nice place," I said. "Do you come here often?" Lois ignored my attempt at small talk. She searched my face and found something she could trust.

"Did Mac tell you about the baby?" she asked.

I nodded.

"John doesn't want to marry me. He wants me to get an abortion." Tears puddled up in her eyes.

I placed my hand on hers and gently squeezed. "I'm sorry," I said. "Mac says John's crazy about you. I'm sure you can work something out." I didn't tell her that Mac also said that John was married to a woman in Kentucky.

"I don't know what to do. If my husband finds out..." Tears spilled from her frantic wide-open eyes. She laid her head on the table and sobbed. "I should have been more careful."

I had no words of comfort for Lois. I knew all too well that we were both caught in disabling attractions to men who planned to dump us as soon as the crew moved to another location. I squeezed her hand again.

I saw Mac pay the bartender. "They're coming back," I said. Lois sat up, blew her nose, and wiped her tears. Mac's steps snapped in a beeline in our direction. John ambled like a black bear on a bad day.

When John sat down, Lois leaned into him and soft tears flowed down her stained cheeks. John placed his pocket watch on the table, and except for the frequent glances toward the entrance, he stared at the timepiece. When the food came, Lois nibbled at her hamburger, leaving all but a few bites on her plate. John wolfed his

steak and tapped his finger on the edge of the table while we finished our fish. We ate in silence, each of us processing the situation in our own minds. When Mac finished his entrée, the men shook hands, and we followed John and Lois out of the building. We didn't even order our usual créme-de-menthe.

While we walked to the car, I asked, "What did you and John talk about when you went to the bar?"

Mac hesitated. "You're not going to run and tell the sheriff, are you?"

"Of course not!"

"Nobody – absolutely nobody can know."

"I understand. What did he want?"

"He wanted me to know he was quitting the job. He's leaving town tonight."

I didn't like John, but running out on Lois put him in a new low category of creep. "I suppose you gave him your blessing."

"Yes, I did."

This time Mac had crossed the line. How could he sanction such irresponsibility? I stared at him, biting my tongue. He wouldn't like the caustic words about to come out of my mouth.

"I gave both of them my blessing. He's taking Lois with him. John wants to get her out of town before her husband finds her. He thinks it's the only way he can save her and the baby."

My opinion of John shot up, and I exhaled my hostile disapproval of both men. They were more honorable than they appeared.

Mac looked straight ahead and eased the Lincoln out of the parking lot while keeping an eye on the police car at the exit. "A trap

for some sap," Mac grumbled. John's pickup followed us out of the lot, but the patrol car didn't move. I breathed easier.

I put my hand on Mac's thigh. "What are the chances they'll stay together?"

"About one in ten thousand."

The windshield wipers swiped the rain away and we could see. I wished humans could turn a switch and undo the miseries they created for themselves. I ached for Lois, knowing that the choices she would have to make for the next several months would require planning and wisdom. I had seen evidence that she was capable of neither.

Mesmerized

With curlers in her hair and sheepskin slippers on her feet, Vera lazed on the couch, reading the Sunday Oregonian. "Good morning, sleepyhead," she said from behind a wall of newsprint. "Help yourself." A teapot in a knitted cozy sat on a serving cart in the middle of the living room, poised and ready for pouring.

I rubbed my eyes and stumbled toward my favorite overstuffed chair.

"While you're still on your feet," Vera said, "put another stick of wood on the fire. It's almost dead."

I pulled the fireplace screen and assessed the situation. Gray embers radiated heat, so I placed a few pieces of kindling over the hot spots and waited for something to happen. The pieces smoldered, and turned black; pencil-thin columns of white smoke curled upward. Suddenly the entire stack burst into flame. I watched the fiery tongues lick the air like hungry dragons. I added small cuts of madrona to feed the fingerlings, and then one sizable log. The fire curled into the fresh wood, snapping and sizzling, turning the white flesh into a smoldering glow.

Once the flames danced around the log, I was awake. I poured a cup of tea, sat it on an end table, curled up with my bathrobe wrapped around my feet, and gazed into the fire.

"We won't need a fire much longer," Vera said. "Did you see the daffodils on the dining table?"

"I did. Are they from your garden?"

Vera looked at me and shook her head. "Of course." She searched through a stack of newspapers and retrieved the last edition of The Reporter, the Curry County newspaper. "I see you're a celebrity. There's a write-up in here about you."

I didn't want to challenge Vera's belief in the printed word, but Walt and The Reporter's editor were best of friends, and anything Walt wanted people to see got published. For weeks, he'd been taking pictures, and the edition Vera held up for me to see featured a full-page spread of recent Extension programs. Right in the center of the front page was a picture of me holding a rockfish in one hand and a fillet knife with the other.

"The bridge club ladies got a lot out of your seafood workshop, and so did I. I always overcooked clams, and now I know how to fix them."

"That's the idea," I said.

"I wish you'd stay. Your programs are better than the agent who went back to school."

"That's very kind of you, and I'd like to stay, but OSU has a different plan for me. I just wish I knew what it was."

Vera laid the paper down. "Don't worry. The university won't let you go." She lifted her teacup and toasted. "To years of success with the Extension Service."

Later that morning at Mac's, I saw a laminated copy of my picture on his table.

"They fixed it at the library," Mac said. "Looked at me kind of funny, but knew what I wanted." Mac picked up the news clip. "I'm going to miss you," he said to the picture.

I felt invisible.

Mac made no reference to our future. We had agreed that our time together would end when I left Gold Beach, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I hoped we would find a way to stay together. Apparently, Mac had no such dream.

He put my picture in the cabinet above the window, and removed a packet of banded envelopes. I recognized his collection of traffic tickets.

"I need to do something about these. Got another one yesterday." He fanned the envelopes across the table.

"Have you considered paying them, or better yet, have you considered going the speed limit?"

Mac looked at me as though I had committed heresy. "Pay them!?"

"I'm saying that you chose to drive over the speed limit, daring the highway patrol to ticket you. Think of it this way: you gambled; you lost; you pay, or they break your knuckles."

Mac laughed. "Yeah, I suppose, but I didn't deserve this one." He slid an envelope across the table. "The cop said I was going sixty in a thirty-five zone. It wasn't posted thirty-five. How was I to know?"

I looked at Mac's ticket. "Are you sure the zone wasn't posted?"

"Absolutely sure! I went back and checked."

"Then write a letter. Tell them what you just told me and ask that the ticket be dismissed. They might reduce the fine." I shrugged. "At least you won't lose anything by writing a letter."

With the arc of an upturned hand, Mac motioned to the incriminating evidence. "The judge will think I'm guilty just because of those."

"Maybe. You take that chance."

A few days later, Mac met me in the parking lot below my office. He rushed toward me waving a letter. "It worked," he said. "The ticket. I don't have to pay the ticket." He grabbed me and we spun around. "From now on, I'm going to listen to you."

Early in April, my break came. I was offered the home economist position in charge of adult Extension programs in Hood River County at twice my present salary. I signed in a heartbeat and began making arrangements for my last days in Gold Beach.

Mac and I adjusted our schedules so we could spend more time together, and near the end of April, just before my birthday, we packed a picnic basket and headed south to Cape Sebastian. On the way, we happened onto a pink-and-white gift shop called the Music Box. The building reminded me of an ice cream truck.

The place glistened with white-glove cleanliness. Crystals spun in the breeze each time the door opened, sending rainbows in circles around the store, hypnotizing the customers into buying the shiny baubles. Spotless glass from floor to ceiling caught the shimmer of the April morning. We stepped into the likeness of an ice sculpture. The sound system completed the fantasy with the notes of the *Music Box Dancer* singing in our ears.

The sparkling April morning, the pink and white building, and the tinkling sounds of the music turned us into playful children, handling the delicate trinkets clearly marked "Do Not Touch." We wound each music box and made a game of trying to guess the names of the tunes, daring the owner to ask us to stop.

I stood close to Mac and absorbed the lingering scent of his pipe, the fresh smell of soap and cologne, and the light odor of sweat. I let my guard down. I listened to my heart and looked into Mac's eyes with love. I saw the reflection of my feelings in his, but we had an agreement. Our eyes betrayed our minds, but our lips remained loyal. Neither of us spoke. I would miss him terribly when I moved to Hood River.

Mac went to the back of the store to look at the display of greeting cards and I migrated to the eight-track tapes. I purchased Neil Diamond's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and slid it into my pocket.

Supplied with a bottle of Cabernet, a small blanket, the makings for sandwiches, and a new eight-track tape, we completed the trek to Cape Sebastian. The park entrance took us up the face of the mountain to the parking lot on top of the world. We looked down on the ocean. The air was warm and fresh, so we began the hike down the mile-long spruce-covered trail.

Even though the air felt comfortable, the ground oozed and squished from winter rains. Mac carried the picnic basket, and I wore the blanket around my shoulders. We stabilized our steps by hanging onto branches and each other, sliding and slipping down the obscure path. For the last few feet of slime, we slid on our butts to a cliff

overlooking the water. We sat together in the mud and laughed while listening to the surf boom against the rocks below.

Our jeans were wet and dirty, but the blanket was dry. Mac removed his denim jacket and tossed it into the arms of a huge Sitka Spruce. I crawled under a bowed branch into a needle bed provided by the nurturing tree and peeked out at the ocean like a wood nymph.

"I'm going to take my muddy pants off and let them air dry for a while. How about you?" Mac said.

"Sure, I don't need this earthen pillow." I removed my jeans and tossed them into the clearing. Gobs of dirt fell off when Mac shook them and spread them, bottoms up, over a bush. Then he crawled into the shaded nest with me.

We sat on the blanket, Mac opened the wine, and I made sandwiches.

"A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread – and Thou"

"The *Rubaiyat*?" I asked.

"Yes, probably the most quoted verse."

When we were hiking, the air felt warm, but I got cold sitting half-naked in the shade. I snuggled into Mac's warmth and we took turns drinking from the bottle. We sipped, and kissed, tasting the wine on each other's tongue; sipped again, kissed again, and again, until the wine was gone.

The wine stimulated my exploring tongue, warmed my stomach and teased my inner thighs. Mac pulled the blanket around me, gently sliding his hands down my sides; pulling my hips over his. The sun shone on our jeans drying in the bushes with legs spread in suggestive repose. The surf pounded against the rocks, splashing,

hissing, and rolling back into the sea. I closed my eyes and listened to the push and release of the restless waters. The primal sea ebbed and flowed around jutting rocks where seagulls circled in screaming delight, taking sips, then swallows, and then hasty gulps from the fruits of the sea.

Mac filled an emptiness buried under layers of commitment and discipline. I fought to maintain control, to ward off the primitive stranger emerging from my inner depths, but Mac reached deeper and deeper into my needs, into my heart, pulling hidden response from my soul. I had no will. I went tumbling over the edge of reason into cascading release. Tears streamed down my face. I shook like the very pillars of my being had been stripped away, tossing me into torturous ecstasy, convulsing with flowing satisfaction.

Mac held me and rubbed my back. The tears subsided and I stopped shaking. He wrapped the blanket around me and we slept.

When I awoke, Mac was sitting in the sun, fully dressed, puffing on his pipe. My jeans lay folded next to me. I watched him for a few minutes, admiring his angular body and appreciating his determined tenderness. He looked content sitting alone with his pipe.

Although my jeans were not completely dry, I pulled them on. Mac turned and watched me dress. When I gave the tight denim pants a little tug to close the zipper, he grinned, that same teasing grin that first attracted my attention. "Good morning, sleepy," he said. "Have a nice nap?"

I sat on my haunches next to him. "Yes, I did. Had the most amazing dream. Dreamed I was seduced by a prince."

Mac smiled. "Don't let me catch him with you. You know how jealous I am."

"I know."

We gathered our belongings and turned inland. The mile up the hill felt like three. Branches tore at my clothing, and in places, I crawled on all fours over a near vertical path. The steep climb challenged my fatigued body, and I welcomed the occasional rest when Mac stopped to suck on a cold pipe.

When we reached the car, a light breeze wafted across the cape, and from our vantage point, we could see fishing boats and barges far out to sea. I put *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* into the tape deck and we looked down on an outcropping of black rock against white sands and blue water. We watched the sun arc the western sky while we listened to the music. As though rehearsed, a seagull played out the lyrics of Neil Diamond's song. I watched the bird fly in circles above us. "Jonathan knows what we've been doing," I said.

Mac lay back in his seat, reached over and patted my knee. "Are you bragging?" He reached under his seat for a large envelope. "Tomorrow is your birthday, but I want you to have your card now."

The Hallmark masterpiece was double the size of a standard greeting card with a picture of a rose in abstract pastels and a bottle of red wine matching the wine colored script. The verse:

A Special Day
I'm hoping today
was special for you
and all of your wishes came true.
I hope that each moment,
each kiss, each caress
completed a small part of you.

I'm hoping tomorrow
will be special as well,
although we may be apart,
you'll never be gone
you'll always be near,
forever a part of my heart.

Signed, Mac

A tear came to my eye, and I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Mac had said that he would never tell me he loved me, and he was as good as his word, but something happened that day that we both felt. Whether he said it or not, I knew he loved me.

Goodbye

The few days we had left slipped through our fingers like beads on a broken string. Since I didn't know where I'd be living in Hood River, and Mac's crew was moving to a new location down the line, neither of us had a mailing address or telephone number. Mac gave me an address in Vancouver, Washington, and asked me to write to him there. "At least a card with your phone number and address," he said. "They'll keep it for me at twenty-one ten."

I gave Vera my key and looked back over my shoulder. When I drove away, I knew I'd never see her again. She had been good to me, had opened her home and guided my thinking through some problematic times. I would miss her and many others in Gold Beach. I drove by the Red and White Cafè, the Top Deck, the Music Box, the Rod-N-Reel, and the Curry County Courthouse:, and then I headed the tired little Pinto toward the trailer park.

Mac and I had shared so much, and I wanted to say goodbye with something special. He had mentioned many times that he wished I'd spend the night with him, something I had not done in the nine months we'd been together.

Staying with Mac that final night would be the grand finale, an appropriate finish to a stellar performance, and a statement of affection as the sounds of our togetherness faded away. He'd soon

replace me with someone new, and I wondered who she'd be, but on our last night, I wanted him to be thinking only of me.

I had bathed, combed, powdered, and painted until I looked and smelled like a North Portland streetwalker. I wore a revealing silk top that drove Mac crazy and pink pants too tight to be worn in public. I was a temptress ready to drive my man wild.

I rounded the corner on the road to Mac's trailer. The spiky monkey tree marked the spot from a mile away. I shifted in my seat and sucked in my breath. Ever since the day at the cape, I became aroused at the mere thought of Mac's pelvis against mine. I exhaled, sat up straight and lifted my chest. I was so ready that I wanted him to take me the minute I crossed the threshold. I fantasized a wild steamy encounter under the monkey tree with the landlady peering through her blinds. I pressed my knees together, sucked in my stomach, and tightened my pelvic muscles. "Take me," I said to the absent Mac. "Satisfy your lust one more time."

I pressed the accelerator and hurried down the long drive into the trailer park, rounded the corner to Mac's space. Someone with an old rusty brown Chevrolet with Washington plates had parked in my place. It wasn't one of Mac's men. They all drove pickups.

I eased the Pinto down the quiet road until I was in front of the trailer where I pulled up and stopped, wondering what to do. While I sat contemplating my decision, Mac and a younger square-built man came out of the trailer. I expected the man to drive away, but he didn't. He glanced my way, looked back at Mac, and unloaded luggage.

I watched the newcomer take his belongings inside the trailer, and I wondered why he was there. I stepped out of the car with my

gaze focused on Mac. The door provided a screen from prying eyes, so I postured in my most seductive pose; but rather than embrace me, he backed away. Perhaps my appearance embarrassed him. "All packed?" he asked. I couldn't read his blank expression.

"Yes, I thought I'd spend some time with you and leave in the morning."

He avoided looking at me, stepping back as I attempted to close the distance. Mac was clearly uncomfortable. I grabbed my windbreaker and wrapped it around me. "I'll need to leave early," I said.

"Well, have a safe trip."

He spoke like I was one of his men going on vacation. He couldn't have shocked me more if he had dumped ice down my back. "Aren't you even going to invite me in?"

Mac's head moved just a bit, but his eyes went to the trailer. "My son is here. I wasn't expecting him."

The behavior didn't make sense. What was happening? And then I got it. "He doesn't know, does he?"

"No."

"And you're not going to tell him."

"No."

I clenched my teeth and returned to the Pinto. The blinds in the landlady's trailer moved. "Well, I guess this is goodbye."

Mac stood ramrod straight. He said nothing until I started to drive away. "Write! Please write!" he pleaded. His eyes had filled with tears, and then he turned and marched to the trailer without even looking back. He didn't wave, stop to reconsider, or show any sign

that he wanted me to stay. I had seen tears, or had I? I was so confused that I didn't know what to think.

I drove the Pinto north on Highway 101. I shifted gears, turned the wheel, and stopped at red octagons. But uneasy monsters screamed in my brain: You messed up. You'll never see him again. You're alone. I had no energy for logical thinking. I drove out of habit and raw determination through Gold Beach, over the Rogue River Bridge, and into the wall of evergreen beyond Wedderburn.

One fact was clear. Our affair was over. Nine months of roller coaster excitement had ended. Tears welled in my eyes. One spilled over my cheek, than another, and another, until I couldn't see. I stopped at the overlook at Nesika Beach and let the tears flow unrestrained.

From high above the water, I heard the roar of the ocean rushing at the cliffs below, ageless and impersonal in its relentless quest to cut and shape the rocks and the shoreline. The sun dipped an edge into the sea, gasped and plunged its blazing belly into the darkening Pacific. The sharp-edged cliffs flickered and retreated into the purple softness of twilight, and silent seagulls perched on the rocks for the night.

When morning returned, the waves would be there, splashing against the same rugged cliffs, the sands would continue to shift, and seagulls would follow the fishing boats, dipping and screeching as usual. Life at Nesika Beach would continue just as it had for eons, but I would be gone. The travel trailer experience had cracked the chrysalis of my isolated past, my wings were dry, and I was ready to fly.

Part II: Reality

June 1979 to March 1984

Family

"Write! Please write!" Mac had said. I sealed the envelope and laid it on top of the office correspondence. I looked out my basement window onto a shadowy strip of dirt and rocks between the ancient church to the south and the equally ancient courthouse where I worked. The wind blew a crumpled piece of paper into the corner, and I cringed at the moldy apple core resting against the window glass. It was June 1979, and I had been in Hood River a week.

I made a run to the post office to get away from the depressing surroundings. Voices bounced against the concrete walls and echoed down the basement hallway, and I ascended the worn marble steps to the exit and to a brighter world outside.

Pear blossoms filled the valley with fragrance. Mt. Hood loomed against a clear blue sky, its melting icecap feeding the cascading Hood River. The wind, a constant in the Columbia River Gorge, destroyed what was left of my hairstyle and whipped my clothing like a flag on a pole. I took a flight of steps from the street in front of the courthouse to the post office several feet below.

I dropped the mail into the slot, wondering who might open my letter to Mac. "Send it to twenty-one ten," he had said. I didn't know who lived at the mystery address in Vancouver, Washington. I would have felt more confident if I had put my note in a bottle and sent it out to sea.

When I thought about the situation, a sense of futility hit me. Mac had promised me nothing, and I knew he found companionship anywhere he happened to be. I missed him, but I had to face the facts. Our relationship was no different than the dozens he'd known before. Even if he did get my message, I wondered if Mac would make the effort to see me. After all, every little town offers someone new.

My job didn't give me much time to ponder the possibilities. In addition to my regular duties, I represented the Extension Service on the Coalition Against Alcoholism, a multi-agency task force designed to reduce underage drinking in Hood River County. I gathered up the mail and returned to the courthouse, grabbed my car keys and headed for a weekly meeting. As I crossed the courtyard to the parking lot, I heard the strains of *The Music Box Dancer* and saw children gathered around the pink and white ice cream cart. I felt an emotional pull that took me back to Gold Beach and the little gift shop that sparkled in the April sunlight. I missed Mac.

"Students in Hood River High School are more likely to abuse alcohol than students from any other school in the state of Oregon," reported the perky young speaker from the Department of Health. I sat in the high school auditorium surrounded by teachers, social workers, clergy, Boy and Girl Scout leaders, and other interested citizens.

I listened to information that I needed to know but didn't want to hear. My children, Lea Ann and Darrell, were finishing the school year in the Willamette Valley and would be with me soon. Darrell was a freshman in high school, and I wondered if Hood River would be

the best place to bring him. Most troubling, Darrell fit the profile of a child at risk: divorced parents, unsupervised much of the time, and at least one parent who drinks too much.

Lea Ann was completing her first year at the University of Oregon. She put more energy into sorority activities than her studies, and I teased her that she was majoring in social life. Hood River would offer her nothing she didn't know already.

I had found a three-bedroom apartment near the edge of town and moved my belongings from storage to the new address. Darrell and Lea Ann moved in with me a week later, and the three of us settled down in our standard-issue three-bedroom townhouse surrounded by pear orchards. Lea Ann flitted around the apartment, claimed the room with the view, then she found a summer job in Eugene, and I didn't see her all summer.

Darrell moped around the apartment. He met a few boys at church, but he yearned for his friends in Lebanon. He asked questions about the Hood River High School: Will they have a jazz band? Do they have an electronics club? Do the science teachers understand physics? Can I get advanced placement math classes?

I couldn't answer his questions, and from what I had learned as a member of the alcohol coalition, Hood River High School didn't hold a candle to his former school.

While unpacking the last of the boxes, I found the Hallmark card Mac had given me the day of our Cape Sebastian picnic. I placed it on my nightstand, played the Neil Diamond tape, and wept. It had been three weeks since I sent the letter to twenty-one ten, and I had

heard nothing. The threads of hope were fraying. Only memories, a card, and an eight-track tape remained.

After a period of self-indulgent nostalgia, I noticed Darrell standing in the doorway. He hadn't said a word. I dried my eyes, "Did you need something?" I asked.

"It can wait," he said, turning away. "Didn't mean to interrupt."

Lea Ann enrolled in her sophomore year at the University of Oregon, and Darrell made a big hit as the new kid in Hood River High School. Girls called him at home, which made him feel uncomfortable. Occasionally stalking hopefuls stood outside our door, waiting to get a look at him. There were so many curious females that whenever the phone rang, he mumbled something about being a prisoner in his own home.

One day, we were eating lunch when the phone rang. I asked Darrell if he wanted to answer it.

"No," he snapped, and headed for the garage.

"Where are you going?" He was fourteen and saw no reason to report to his mother.

"For a bike ride," he said.

"When will you be back?"

"In about an hour."

Darrell gripped the doorknob and watched me pick up the persistent ringing phone.

"Hello sweetheart. Just read your letter," said the man on the line.

I gripped the phone, half believing the reality of the moment. "Relax," I said to Darrell. "This time it's for me." He gave me a puzzled look and closed the door.

My fingers tightened around the phone. I took a slow breath and spoke with disciplined politeness. "Well, this is a surprise!"

Before the words left my mouth, conflicting thoughts rushed in. Mac's coolness when I left Gold Beach and the long silence that followed dampened my joy. Confused tears filled my eyes.

"I'm in Hood River, and I'd like to see you."

Mac's masculine voice softened the negative swirl, and my attitude improved. He spoke with confidence, as if we had parted with smiles and tender words. Gold Beach was temporary, a fantasy, a romance, but this was reality. I had a son to supervise and community responsibilities. I had tasted the thrill of living on my own, and Mac seemed awkwardly out of place.

I knew too that I'd not have a second chance. "I'd love to see you too, but things are different. My son is with me." Mac knew little about my children, maybe about children in general. "Would you like to meet Darrell?" I asked. I sucked in my breath and waited for a response. I wondered if the furrow in Mac's brow had deepened as I remembered it doing when he was reluctant to make a commitment to something distasteful.

"I'd like to meet your son, and your daughter too. I'd like to take the three of you out to dinner."

A few minutes later, Mac arrived at the apartment with a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon and a dozen red roses. "Congratulations on

your new job." He handed his gifts to me and looked around the apartment. "Nice place."

I carried the roses and the wine to the kitchen. We toasted our reunion, and we laughed, just as we had the first time we met, but my thoughts were restless. The picture of the rusty Chevrolet under the monkey tree intruded on the idyllic domestic scene. Mac's unexplainable rebuff had not been resolved. "I thought I'd never see you again." I avoided Mac's eyes and concentrated on the roses. "Why were you so mean to me the day I left Gold Beach?"

Mac laid his pipe down and looked out the window. The silence hung like a shroud. When he turned around, the expression on his face resembled a rabbit caught in a snare. "You don't forget much do you?"

I had backed him into a corner. "No, I don't."

"I couldn't let my son know you meant something to me."

"What?" My hands froze in mid-air. I turned on a heel and faced him. "Why not? Am I so awful that you were ashamed to introduce me?"

The wrinkles around his eyes deepened. "Ashamed of you? Never!"

I laid the clippers on the counter, rinsed my hands, and sat down at the table. I waited for his explanation. "Go on. I'm listening."

After a long and meditative pause, Mac began. "Ronnie is a Vietnam vet." His words were soft and apologetic. "He's always been a rebel, but when he returned from Nam, he'd changed. Patricia, he's a drug addict with an explosive temper. I was afraid he'd hurt you."

My mouth fell open. "Your son?"

"Yes, my son. I wasn't a good parent, and now we're all paying for my neglect. He's so hot headed that his visits always end in a fight. I didn't want you to get caught in the middle."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't. Ronnie was listening to every word."

"You could have called or written."

"I didn't know where you were until last night. My mail had piled up in our mother's house."

"What do you mean, 'our mother'?"

"I have a sister. Ma is our mother. She isn't well; didn't forward the letter you sent."

"Twenty-one ten is your mother's address?"

"Yes, my parents have lived there since the early forties. I went to high school in Vancouver."

I mulled his story around in my head. It seemed plausible, full of missing pieces, but plausible.

Mac put his hand on mine. "Can we start over?"

"And your son?"

"I don't know what to tell you. He has a talent for showing up when he is least wanted. I don't like it either."

I observed Mac's discomfort in talking about his son, so I dropped the inquest. I had learned enough to know that I wanted to avoid the stocky man who drove the rusty brown Chevrolet.

I had placed the roses in a prominent spot on the table, Mac was puffing on his pipe, and the wine was rapidly disappearing when I heard the garage door open and close.

"What's that smell, Mom?" Darrell called from the hallway. "Did you know the Mafia's parked in the driveway?"

Mac snickered.

Darrell came through the living room and around the corner to the kitchen. He saw Mac and stopped, sheepishly assessing the situation.

"This is Mac," I said.

Mac stood. "a-k-a the Mafia."

Darrell gave him a disapproving look.

Mac reached for Darrell's hand. "Glad to meet you. I'm here to ask your permission to take your mother out to dinner, and you too if you'd care to join us." He shook my son's hand.

Darrell looked my way. "Is this the guy who gave you the mushy card that makes you cry?"

His awareness of the meaning behind the card surprised me. I expected him to be critical of my affection for someone other than his father, but his body language and facial expressions gave me no clues about his feelings. Regardless, I had to answer his question simply and honestly. "Yes, he's the man who gave me the card."

"Cool!" Darrell said, and headed toward his room. "Call me when you're ready to go to dinner."

I heard the door close before I allowed myself to breathe. "I think he likes you."

"The man-to-man approach works every time."

Mac appeared pleased with himself, but I knew the real test was yet to come. "Darrell was easy," I said. "His sister will be another matter."

Mac stood up and stretched. “Is she anything like her mother?”

“Maybe.”

“Hmmm! Could be a challenge.” He grinned as if he had told a clever joke.

That evening at the Hood River Inn, Mac slipped a twenty into the hostess’ hand, and we were escorted to the best table in the house, a round table in the corner of the dining room with a view of a wind surfer making a colorful splash against the Columbia River.

Darrell watched Mac’s every move; how he placed his napkin, the way he lifted his glass, and the confident way he spoke to the waiter. When Mac laid the silver money clip on the table, Darrell’s eyes popped open. The wad of bills was more than enough to leave scars on the brain of an impressionable youth.

Mac ordered prime rib. Darrell ordered prime rib. Mac leaned on his elbow and tilted his head. Darrell leaned on his elbow and tilted his head, and I wasn’t sure, but Darrell’s voice seemed deeper.

After a flawless dinner beginning with a shrimp cocktail and ending with chocolate mousse, we returned to the apartment feeling stuffed and lazy. Mac and I dropped down on the couch, and Darrell took the TV to his room. I turned the lights down, tuned the radio to a country station, and we snuggled.

“Did you notice that Darrell was imitating you at dinner?” I asked.

“Sure did! He’s at an age when he needs a father.”

Mac’s statement troubled me. Darrell missed his old friends, and he talked of going back to his old school in Lebanon. I was

concerned about the peer influence and drinking in the Hood River High School, but I hadn't thought about the importance of his father. Mac's observation gave me one more reason to question our decision to have Darrell live with me.

"I don't want him to leave."

"He needs his father. Any boy who has a real father is lucky."

"But Darrell's father has never paid much attention to him."

"If that's true, he isn't a real father. He's just a man like my old man was, like I was."

Mac puffed on a cold pipe, took it out of his mouth, and emptied the residue into an ashtray. He filled the bowl with fresh tobacco, lit a match, and slowly drew fire into the blend.

I watched the tiny spark grow larger with each puff until an ember the size of a marble glowed cherry red. Tammy Wynette's radio voice urged me to "stand by my man," and I listened attentively to Mac's words. "Did you admire your father?" I asked.

"I loved him, but I didn't admire him." Mac tapped his pipe to settle the tobacco and took another puff. "He seldom had a job, and there was never enough money from milking cows when we lived in Iowa to pay the bills. We were dirt poor. We left the the farm in 1940 and came west so he could work in the shipyards."

Mac stopped talking and I felt myself relaxing, but when Mac's hand slid under my blouse, I tensed and listened for sounds from upstairs. All was quiet from Darrell's room and I relaxed. I had unbuttoned the top button of Mac's shirt when the sound of a key in the front lock caught my attention. I sat up and smoothed my clothing. The door swung open, a hand flipped the switch, and the lights came on.

"Mom! What are you doing?" Lea Ann stood in the doorway staring at us, and she was furious!

I jumped up. "Honey, I didn't expect you. This is Mac."

"Yeah, yeah," she grumbled, carrying her suitcase up the stairs.

"Hi Mac," she said as an afterthought. She didn't look at either of us. "I hate my sorority sisters! I quit school," she called from the landing. "I'll be living here now.

My children's needs and the demands of the job left me with little time for Mac. We kept in touch by phone, telling each other that we were only seventy miles apart.

My daughter's brokenhearted departure from college and my son's displeasure with the Hood River High School tested my parental skill and flexibility. By October, Lea Ann had found a job and a place of her own, and Darrell told me that he wanted to live with his father.

Nothing I could say or do persuaded Darrell to give the new school a chance. By the time his dad came with the pickup, I was out of arguments. All I could do was tell my son that I loved him and help him pack.

When the sound of the pickup faded away, the quiet was deafening. I listened to the echo of my own voice in the cavernous three-bedroom apartment that had been so full just days before. I cleaned the floors, washed windows, changed beds, and waited for my children to visit on weekends.

Sins of the Father

"When my dad was alive, this place was a showcase," Mac said, "but my sister has all she can do, taking care of our mother."

Twenty-one ten, a one-story tract house built in the forties, sat beneath a row of huge fir trees. A variety of shrubs filled in the narrow yard on the sides. In front, overgrown rhododendrons competed for space with aggressive roses snaking along the top of a white fence.

Mac's trailer was parked on a concrete pad near the street in front of the dwelling but separated by a dense row of photinia. From where I parked my car, the house was out of sight. When I went inside the trailer, the dark spot where Jeanette's picture once hung took me back to Gold Beach, to the pounding surf and the horizontal rain; but a truck passed dangerously close to the trailer, and I quickly returned to Vancouver, Washington.

"This is my temporary home when a job ends," Mac said. "It's close to the union hall and to the employment office. The city doesn't approve, but I'm well on my way to another job before they get serious about hauling me away."

Mac was a different man in this setting, one stripped of his usual bravado, and I wondered why. This man slumped and was a little unkempt. A used skillet sat on the burner and newspapers filled one corner of the bench seat.

"Sorry about the mess." Mac took a bottle of V.O. from an overhead cabinet and poured a shot for each of us. "I've been busy. I didn't realize how sick our mother was until I moved up here." He sat the bottle on the table between us. "They don't know you're here." Mac threw his hands up. "Shit! They don't know I'm divorced, and when they find out, they'll be mad as hell." He poured another shot. "But then I've always been the bad kid." Mac chuckled. There was something painful in his laugh.

"Why did they think you were bad?"

"It's a long story. The church had something to do with our adoption, and a group of them would come to our house for prayer meetings almost every week. My father went to the barn when they came, but our mother got into it."

"Why do you call her "our mother" instead of "my mother?"

"Because I always felt like a part of a package. Although we were borne by different women, Virginia and I shared the same birthday. We were raised like twins, dressed alike, same gifts, same training. Our mother said she did that to be fair. The church treated us like a matched set, too. One time they sat Virginia and me in the center of a circle, got down on their knees, and looked at us like we were damaged goods. The preacher leaned over me and said, 'Forgive these bastard children, the fruits of sin.' I knew I had done something terribly wrong, but I was too young to know what it was."

"Before we went to school, our mother read the Bible to us. I know the Bible better than most people, and I've never read a word of it myself." Mac chuckled. "While our mother was getting all hot and bothered about God, my old man got drunk in the hayloft. He kept a

gallon of hooch in a milk can. I discovered it one day when I was about ten, but it tasted so vile that I didn't drink much."

"When I got a little older, I refused to get up early enough to go to church. Of course, that infuriated our self-righteous mother, but to me, it felt like I had removed a sliver from under a fingernail."

The blinds were drawn, and the outside light was fading. Mac stood up, rested one arm against a cabinet, and looked between slats toward the house. With his back to me, he mumbled, "Oh, God, I believe, just not the way she believes."

I opened my mouth to agree, but I didn't want to intrude, so I kept my thoughts to myself.

"One day, I asked our mother if she knew who my real father was. 'Why do you want to know?' she asked. 'I wondered if I looked like him.' I said. She gave me a hateful look that I'll never forget. 'Yes, you do. Just like him.' That's all she'd say."

"Since my adopted mother wouldn't tell me about my real father, I made one up. In fact, I made up several. On some days, I saw him as a well-dressed man who drove a fast car. He spent money like water and had a pretty girl on his arm, a different one every night, and he'd gamble high stakes and win."

"That's a colorful image," I said.

"That's one. On another day, I saw him as a man of principle, a man on the church board, a Mason of the highest order, an educated man in a university where others sought his opinion."

Mac put the bottle back in the cabinet. "There were others, but I liked those two best. My adopted father was a weak man. I couldn't see myself in him. He was an example of what I didn't want to be."

Mac took a long puff on his pipe. “I learned to garden from him, but that’s about it.”

“Did you know your biological mother?”

Mac cracked a smile. “I think so, but my parents never said. Off the record, I think she was the schoolteacher who rented a room at our house. She ignored Virginia but made a big fuss over me. One day, our adopted mother sent me to my room, and the two women exchanged words. I heard our mother tell the teacher, ‘Stay out of our business. You’ve given up your rights, and that’s that!’ I didn’t think much about it then, but I’ve wondered since.”

“I’ll bet you have.”

“We moved here from Iowa when I was fourteen. In Iowa, our major income came from selling milk. I milked a lot of cows when I was a kid. I spent more time in the barn than in the house. I missed it.”

“You missed milking cows?”

“No, I missed the barn. Alice and Marie, the girls next door, came over almost every day, and we played in the hayloft.”

Mac’s eyes softened as he puffed on his pipe. “When we were five or six years old, we made up a number of you-show-me-yours-and-I’ll-show-you-mine games. We often stripped and lay naked on a tarp in the haymow exploring each other. Sometimes we played doctor. I loved that game.” Mac snickered, paused, and looked me in the eye.

“When I was twelve, I had a wet dream. I couldn’t wait to try it with a girl. As usual, the sisters were more than ready to play, but when I ejaculated, Marie screamed and ran out of the barn.”

“And Alice?”

"She stayed, and she played. She liked it as much as I did. We sneaked out to the hayloft every chance we had for over a year. I can still remember her slippery heat." Mac shifted his position. "She had red hair and freckles, and she had the moves. My God, she was good!" Mac shook his head as though he didn't believe his own story. "I was in love," he said. "I thought of nothing else but spreading her legs."

Although I understood Mac's puberty experimentation, he seemed far too cavalier. "Did you use protection?"

"Protection for what? We were kids from homes where nobody talked about what we were doing, and we were so dumb, we didn't even know we might be making a baby."

I found it hard to believe that Mac's parents didn't teach him about the birds and the bees. I knew where babies came from before I started kindergarten.

Mac continued his story. "Marie said Alice was pregnant, so we hitchhiked to the county seat, lied our ages, and got married. That's what people did back then. When we were saying our vows, all I could think of was sleeping next to her all night and getting it whenever I wanted."

"That sounds like every man's fantasy.

"It didn't turn out like we planned."

"It never does. What happened?"

"When her parents found out, they had the marriage annulled, and I wasn't allowed near her."

"What about your parents? What did they do?"

"They didn't talk about it, but they must have been mad as hell, because we moved to Washington to get away from their shame. I never saw Alice again."

"What happened to the baby?"

"If Alice had a baby, nobody told me. Marie had convinced us that Alice was pregnant, but I don't think she ever was. After that, our mother gave up on me like she had given up on the old man. She let me do whatever I wanted. I know this, I learned at fourteen the one thing I've been good at all my life, how to please a woman."

Mac stretched. "I need a shower," he said. He tossed his dirty clothes into a laundry basket on the way to the bathroom. "While we're out, I'd like to buy a card for our mother. She'll be ninety-one tomorrow."

While Mac showered, I reflected on his story. Some time back, he had told me that he had been married five times. I wondered if he counted the annulled marriage as one of the five. How might his life have changed if the parents had honored the young lovers? I played with the possibility that subconsciously Mac thought all marriages were temporary, a fleeting experience, just like the first one.

We had dinner at Mac's favorite steak house. Between bites of prime rib and red wine, we continued the conversation about his family.

"I'd like to meet your mother and sister," I said.

"Why?"

"Because they're your family."

Mac looked like I had asked him to chop off a thumb. "If you want to, but that house is not Currier and Ives."

"Why do you come back here? It seems stressful for you."

"To look for work. This time I learned that our mother is dying. She took care of me when another woman gave me up. I owe her something for that."

The next morning, I waited in the trailer while Mac checked inside his mother's house. When he returned, he walked ramrod straight, his jaw set like steel. "Let's go out for breakfast," he said. "Virginia needs more time." Mac was obviously upset, but he didn't explain why.

After breakfast, Mac escorted me up the steps to the kitchen door. A curtain covered the small window and the door squeaked when Mac pushed it open. Stale human smells nearly overcame me. On the kitchen counter, unwashed dishes waited for attention and the sink was filled with greasy gray dishwater and a few cooking pots. A trash can next to the range overflowed with discarded packaging and rotting fruit.

Wearing a faded pink robe and knitted blue slippers, Virginia sat on the edge of a stained overstuffed sofa in the living room. She rocked back and forth, oblivious to our entrance.

Mac gently touched her shoulder. "Virginia, this is Patricia. I told you about her."

Virginia blinked like a toad. She crossed her arms close to her chest and leaned forward against her thighs.

Mac remained standing, and not being offered a chair, I did the same. He paced the living room and stopped directly in front of Virginia. "How's our mother today?"

"The same," Virginia drawled. She relaxed her arms, sat upright, and brushed a lock of faded blonde hair out of her eyes. "Just ate breakfast."

Mac nodded and disappeared down the hall, leaving me in the living room with Virginia. I smiled, but she didn't respond. Her eyes were open but blank. White scars on her hands and forearms contrasted sharply with the freckled skin on her face. She rocked back and forth, talking softly to herself, "Praise Jesus. Praise the Lord." She made no indication that she knew I was in the room.

I heard muffled voices coming from the back of the house. When Mac returned to the living room, he ushered me outside. The odors of industrial pollution were nothing compared to the stench of that house.

After nearly an hour of silence, with Mac refilling his glass more often than I liked, he blurted out, "She's schizophrenic. Virginia's crazy."

"I suspected as much," I said.

"She was all right until she married Mike. He was so smart, so superior, an atomic physicist working on the bomb in New Mexico. I never did like him. About a year after their wedding, Sandy was born, and soon after, Virginia began hearing voices. Mike took her to the hospital a number of times, but when Virginia plunged both arms into a water bath canner filled with boiling water, said God told her to do it, Mike had had enough and sent her back to twenty-one ten. He kept Sandy with him. He then proceeded to divorce Virginia. Our parents were getting on in years by that time, but they welcomed Virginia back home."

Mac paced the length of the trailer. “I have to get her out of there.”

“Virginia?”

“No, not Virginia, our mother. Virginia can’t take care of her, and neither can I.

When I returned to Hood River, the situation at twenty-one ten haunted me. Mac had dealt with his mother’s care on his own. He didn’t seek professional advice or call on his friends. He might not have told me if I hadn’t asked to meet his family.

That Friday, he phoned to let me know that his mother was in the hospital. I drove the seventy miles from Hood River to Vancouver to give him moral support.

Autumn winds flung leaves into the air in angry protest against approaching gray clouds. Within minutes rain poured down. I clutched the wheel in a desperate attempt to win the wrestling match with the weather. Traffic slowed near Portland and crawled over the Interstate Bridge.

When I reached twenty-one ten, Mac was not at the trailer. He was expecting me, so I went inside and waited. After a while, the winds let up, and I walked along the front yard fence. Several shrubs had been moved, those remaining were shaped to fit their space, and the lawn had been mowed. Mac must have done it.

The rain returned and I went back inside and made a pot of coffee. I was searching through the refrigerator for something to eat when I heard a car pull in behind the trailer. I peeked out the window. It was Mac’s Lincoln.

He opened the door, and a gust of wind caught it and jerked it wide. Mac cursed under his breath and mumbled, "I don't need something else to fix." He shook the rain out of his hair and hung up a dripping yellow slicker. "I'm sorry, Patricia. I had to go to the hospital. Our mother refuses to eat." His face had a haggard look, and his eyes were red from lack of sleep. He appeared smaller than I remembered.

"And she wouldn't eat for me either," he said. "But the bed sores are healing."

"You didn't mention bedsores."

"Didn't I? That's why I took her to the hospital. Virginia couldn't handle the infection." Mac looked away for several seconds. He turned back to me, "Patricia, she won't be coming home."

The next morning I accompanied Mac to the hospital. We entered the gerontology wing through double high revolving doors. The antiseptic smell contrasted sharply with the rain-soaked earthy odors outside. We clicked down the hall on a gleaming tile floor that reflected light from a wall of windows. Shriveled and bent patients with drooling wide open mouths, slumped in wheelchairs. The first one snored erratically as we passed. The second one caught Mac's sleeve with a bony claw. "Did you bring Freddie? You said you'd bring him," said the old man.

"Mister, you don't know me," Mac said. He removed the desperate hand and spoke to me. "I'm sorry I had to bring you here."

"Don't apologize. I understand."

Mac led the way to his mother's room and motioned for me to follow. When we entered, I saw a brittle old woman cranked up in a

hospital bed and a nurse encouraging the patient to eat the untouched food. "She's been waiting for you." The nurse handed Mac the spoon. He sat next to his mother's bed and lifted a taste of applesauce to her lips. "Try some," he encouraged.

Black eyes flashed and the mouth closed even tighter. She looked at me and back to her son.

"I brought Patricia so you could meet her. I told you about her last night."

I moved closer to the bed, but Mac's mother turned her face to the wall, a gesture clearly meant to send me away. I whispered to Mac. "I'll wait in the hallway."

About half an hour later, Mac joined me in the waiting area. He had a look of frustration on his face similar to that of the nurse who had tried to feed Mac's mother.

"How'd you do?" I asked.

He shook his head. "She wouldn't eat a bite."

"Is the food that bad?"

"It's not the food, Patricia. It's her way. She wants to die."

His blunt statement shocked me.

"Don't look so alarmed. If you knew what she's been through, you'd understand."

"I'd like to understand. Tell me why she wants to die."

"She and Virginia took care of my uncle and my dad until they passed on. Our mother knows what it takes to care for a sick old person, and she knows Virginia can't do it. She's thinking we'd all be better off without her." Mac's voice was flat yet factual.

"That must make you feel terrible."

"Actually, I share her way of thinking. I plan to do the same when I get old and frail, but I'll do it before someone puts me in a hospital where I have no control."

I gasped. "That's a terrible thing to say."

Mac seemed defensive. "Suicide is less terrible than using all the family resources on a sick old person. The way it is now, they can keep you alive long enough to suck your estate dry, and when the money's gone, they let you die anyway. I want my kids to have something, and I don't intend to spend my last dollars on nursing care. I understand exactly what our mother is doing."

Clearly, Mac valued money, and he would want to share his wealth with his children. I held different values, but Mac's explanation made me understand why he supported his mother's desire to die.

Mac and I left the hospital and walked across the parking lot. The wind blew against us and a biting rain burst from the sky. Mac grasped my hand, and we ran the remaining distance to the Lincoln, a welcome sight in the chilling weather.

"What are you going to do about her?" I asked.

"She can stay in the hospital for another week, then I'll move her to a nursing home. She's mad at me now. She'll hate me when she finds herself in an old folk's home, the one thing I promised her I'd never do."

Mac's mother passed away the following week. After the funeral and the reading of the will, Mac came to Hood River. I was struck by the change. He wore the Southwestern duds he wore the night we met at the Red and White Cafè. The free spirit and carefree

ways I associated with Mac in Gold Beach had returned. His mother's death had released the light hearted side of him.

"The funeral was small," Mac said. "But the reading of the will brought a crowd, including Donna and Ronnie, my children. They were disappointed. Our mother left them nothing. It's funny. Sometimes we imagine our parents doing better than they actually did." Mac tapped his cold pipe, "but in her wisdom, she willed the house to Virginia and me as co-owners. Before she died, she reminded me that 'Sister isn't quite right.' The will is written in such a way that neither of us can sell the house, and it can't be listed as an asset in legal settlements. Virginia does some strange things when she doesn't take her medicine, and our parents knew she could put the house at risk with one misguided schizophrenic message from who-knows-where. The upshot of the will is: we're stuck with the house and with each other for the rest of our lives."

"That's the strangest will I've ever heard of. I can't believe an attorney would do that. There must be a way to get out of it."

"I've checked. I have the responsibility for taxes and maintenance whether I live in the house or not, but I can't sell it or give it away. I'm locked in for the duration."

"Why would your parents do that?"

"Because they knew I'd split at my first opportunity. I'd sell my share and Virginia would be on her own."

"Would you?"

"You bet I would. Virginia needs to be in a crazy house. She can't take care of herself, and I'd like to sell the only asset my parents gave us and use the money to find a place for Virginia where she would get the care she needs."

I understood Mac's discomfort with his inheritance. There was no way he could divorce this one. "Is there any chance you'd ever live in that house?"

His eyes narrowed and the line in his brow went deep. "Not in a million years. That house has meant nothing but misery to me."

The Spare Room

The winds blew harder and the rains fell wetter the winter of 1981. We huddled in the trailer, watching the shingles fly off the roof of twenty-one ten. Mac couldn't stand it. "Who am I kidding? I'm tied to that house, and I can't do one damn thing about it." Mac sat down to a half finished crossword puzzle. "At least I can hide out here."

"Or you could make the house your own," I suggested.

Mac stroked his beard, picked up a pencil, and completed seven across. "My house?" His voice sounded cynical. He filled in eight, nine and thirteen, and then he slammed the pencil down. "Yes, by God, it is my house!" A brief smile escaped his thin lips. "At least half of it is."

With that epiphany, Mac plunged into the re-creation of twenty-one ten as though he loved the place. With tight-lipped determination, he repaired the leaking roof, fixed broken hinges, replaced faulty plumbing, and rented a dumpster to haul away years of resentment.

Mac's plans for change and Virginia's need to live in the past brought the two close to blows. During one of my visits, I found Mac and Virginia in hopeless deadlock. Mac was about to toss a box into the dumpster. His sister objected.

"Mom was keeping that box," Virginia said.

"What for?"

"The TV." Virginia shifted her weight and wrung her hands.

"Why?"

"In case we need to take it back."

Mac rolled his eyes and pitched the container. "I'll be glad when I get this done," he muttered under his breath. "Then I can get out of here."

"What will happen then?" I asked.

Mac's brow wrinkled. His voice hardened. "Virginia will take care of the house, won't you Virginia?"

Virginia looked at the floor, her hands clenched. "I'll try."

I had not read the will, but if Mac had summarized it correctly, Virginia had as much right to make decisions about the house as he did, even to neglect it, if that's what she wanted to do.

"Come," Mac said. "We need your help." He led me to his mother's bedroom where keepsakes filled the closets and drawers. "We've been fighting about what to do. I toss something and Virginia takes it out of the trash, or she gets rid of something that I want to keep."

"Maybe you should wait until the memories fade," I suggested, "before you do anything."

"Can't wait. I'll be going to work any day, and this room needs to be cleaned before I leave."

"My daughter will be visiting next week," Virginia said. "She'll be coming all the way from New Mexico, and I want a nice place for her to stay."

"We've been going in circles," Mac said, "trying to decide what to do."

Virginia spoke up. "You do it Patricia," Decide what we need in our guest room."

"Me? I don't know what you want. I'm not family. I'd feel like a voyeur snooping into your life."

"That's why you can do it," Virginia said. "You're not attached to anything."

"We'll move everything into the living room," Mac said, "including furniture. You tell us what to put back."

The mattress hit the dumpster first, followed by moldy drapes that I held at arm's length on my way outside. Mac and Virginia claimed a few items that disappeared into another part of the house. A dresser, two lamps, one end table, a headboard, and a bed frame remained. The blinds were old but in good condition, and after a thorough cleaning, we decided to keep them.

The room had potential with its two windows, an average sized closet, and an antique ceiling fixture. "It needs paint and window coverings," I said, "and with fresh bedding and a new mattress, your daughter – what's her name?"

"Sandy."

"Sandy should be comfortable here."

Virginia caught Mac's eye and shifted her weight.

"We inherited a little money," Mac said. "I want to paint the entire house and then install carpet."

"And new drapes," said Virginia. They thought of so many things that the inheritance didn't stretch to cover, so we painted first and waited to choose other items later.

By the end of the week, the room smelled clean and looked much brighter. Mac found an oriental rug rolled up in the garage. It covered the area under the bed with several inches to spare, making the room bare-feet friendly. Mac bought a reasonably priced mattress. Virginia picked out drapes and matching bedspread, in blue, Sandy's favorite color.

Sandy arrived the following Saturday. Mac spent that week in his trailer, giving Virginia space to be alone with her daughter.

"I wish Sandy were able to take more responsibility for her mother," Mac said, "but she's as crazy as Virginia. Mike allows her to visit Virginia about once a year, and then he locks Sandy up."

"He locks her up? Literally?"

"No, but he won't let her out of his sight, and she knows a good thing. She lets him take care of her. I think she's basically lazy."

Virginia had a series of good days after her daughter left. Her illness seemed under control, and I realized that she had been overextended while taking care of her mother. When she had time for herself, she did quite well, but occasionally, she would go blank. I considered the safety factor in leaving her alone, and I worried that she would do something dangerous after Mac went back to work.

Mac was living on unemployment insurance, and it limited his first-class-or-not-at-all lifestyle. He looked for work everywhere, but leads fizzled, and he was getting discouraged. Mac made job-hunting rounds every week without fail, but jobs were scarce in 1981.

Autumn leaves had turned to dust before the city got around to ticketing Mac's trailer. Mac moved it into the driveway next to the

house, but the city was not appeased. A warning letter with a copy of the city ordinance arrived a week later, and Mac knew he had outstayed his welcome. Mac's friend, Dave, owned a body shop built in a field in Hazel Dell. Mac parked the trailer there, assuring Dave that he would move it when he found work.

Mac moved into the house with great reluctance, but twenty-one ten gave him a base of operation, and he didn't pay rent. He hated Virginia's constant religious talk, and I expected an angry departure any day. If he could hold out until he found work, it would surprise me.

Answering ads and knocking on doors were as disagreeable to Mac as living with Virginia; but winter was almost over, and Mac expected construction work to pick up in the spring.

To make good use of his time while waiting for the phone to ring, Mac and I completely redesigned the landscape until the yard looked as nice as any in the neighborhood. After each week's digging, weeding, pruning and transplanting, we returned tools to their designated places in the garage.

During one of these clean up sessions, Mac noticed a collection of paint cans on a top shelf. He examined them, one by one. "There's paint left in this one," he said. "Some have never been opened. Wish I'd discovered these before we painted the house."

Most of the cans were empty and dry, and we tossed them into the dumpster. I saw one with a loose lid. "That can looks different," I said. "There isn't any dust on it."

Mac shook it. "Something's inside." He opened the can. "Damn! Ronnie's stash. I don't know what this white powder is, but I know it isn't sugar."

"Who's Ronnie?"

"My son. Virginia lets him sleep here once in a while."

I remembered with some discomfort the square man in the rusty Chevrolet parked in my place under the monkey tree in Gold Beach. "Toss it?" I asked.

Mac held the can, turned it over, glanced at the dumpster, thought better of it, and set the paint can back on the shelf where he found it. "No, I should call the police, but Ronnie hasn't been here since the funeral. They would think it was mine. Tomorrow, I'll bury it under that azalea I moved this morning."

"I hope I'm not around when he discovers it's missing," I said. I had visions of a drug addict tearing up the garage, looking for his fix. "That could get ugly."

One bright Sunday morning in April, I went to twenty-one ten to see Mac. A white station wagon sat in the space where the trailer had been. Two young boys raced across the front yard, blasting make-believe guns at make-believe bad guys. Mac would be furious. He threw rocks and cursed at the occasional squirrel or neighborhood cat that dared to dig a hole in the freshly worked soil.

When I entered the house, I smelled baby powder and cleaning products. Children's clothing and toys dominated available space, but the room was tidy. The dining table shown from recent polishing, and the kitchen counters gleamed.

Mac sat in an easy chair holding a baby. Yes, a baby! I looked again. His concentration was riveted on the pink flannel package in his arms. He glanced up as I entered the room. "Oh, hello, Patricia," he said, and his eyes immediately returned to the child. The baby's

face twisted, and a whimper changed Mac's expression from awe to panic. "Donna," he hollered. "Hurry up. This kid is going to cry."

A tall slender woman in her late thirties rushed out of the bathroom, zipping her jeans. Leading with a head of tousled flaxen hair that rampaged over her shoulders, she sprinted to rescue her child. Just as she reached for the wriggling bundle, the baby burst into full-throated screams.

"Poor baby." The woman's raspy voice, although gentle, made me think of a torch singer in a smoky bar. She rested the baby against her shoulder and patted the infant. "Colic," she said. "Gets her everyday about this time."

Mac stood up and put his arm around the woman, turning her to face me. He raised his voice to be heard over the infant's screams. "Donna, this is Patricia." To me, he said, "She's my daughter. Did you see her boys outside?"

"I did," I answered. "Hello Donna." The baby's cries turned to breathless gasps. I studied Donna for a family resemblance but found none except her deep voice. Like her father, her husky purr could easily become a growl.

"Donna and the kids will be staying in our mother's room for a few days."

I nodded, and was about to ask if I could do something to help, but Donna interrupted.

"No, Dad, we won't be staying here. Thanks for the offer, but the boys would have the place destroyed in no time, and then you wouldn't speak to me ever again." She moved her baby to the couch and sat on the edge, patting the little one's stomach. "Can you believe

it? A few seconds ago she was screaming, and now she's almost asleep."

"I see," Mac said. "But where will you stay?"

"Home."

"With Brian?"

"That cheat? No!" Donna shot a scathing look Mac's way. "I'm going to Mom's house. She'll help me get a divorce, even if you won't."

"I should talk to Brian," Mac said.

"No, Dad, please don't. He doesn't need any help." Donna's fingers ran across the top of the coffee table. She jumped up, grabbed a dust cloth and began polishing. I watched, struck by the woman's frantic energy.

"But you're here now. Why do you want to run off?"

"Because Mom understands. After all, she divorced you, didn't she?"

Mac bristled. "I always took good care of you."

"I know, Dad, when you were home. Too bad that happened so seldom." Her voice softened when she saw the hurt in Mac's face. "I'm just kicking a dead horse. Let's forget the past, okay?"

"Okay by me," he said.

I had entered a conversation in progress, so I sat at the table and watched the scene unfold between father and daughter. I felt like a surveillance camera in a convenience store.

Mac's eyes followed Donna's hands, watching the shine emerge from the coffee table. "She's been cleaning ever since she got here," he said to me.

"I can't sit still." Donna knocked down a cobweb in the corner. "There's always plenty to do in Aunt Virginia's house."

Virginia was noticeably absent. I supposed she had gone to church. The baby slept, Donna cleaned, and Mac gazed at his daughter, the crease in his brow getting deeper by the second. Donna put the dust cloth in the laundry basket, and then she packed diapers into a duffle bag.

I glanced at a crossword puzzle on the table. Mac had completed most of it. Number four across was blank, a four letter word for "sad." I picked up the pencil, thought better of it, and laid it down.

Our moments of comparative calm came to a halt when Donna's two boys burst through the door and ran full throttle down the middle of the house to the bathroom.

"Boys, slow down, and wash your hands," Donna called just before the bathroom door slammed. She turned to her father. "I have to get them out of here before they break something," she said, stuffing more items into the duffle bag. "This will hold everything. Thanks for finding it." A bang from the bathroom caught her attention, and Donna's hands moved faster, packing the last of her possessions, and completing the task by tying a knot in the drawstring. "I need to get going," she said, lifting the bag like a stevedore hoisting a crate of pineapples. She carried it on her shoulder through the house and out the door.

From the window, I watched her stuff the bag in the back of the wagon. She adjusted the boxes so everything fit, and then she returned to the house. The boys burst from the bathroom. "Get in the car," Donna said. "We're going." They raced through the house,

slamming the kitchen door on their way out. The boys squirmed like puppies in the back seat. Mac lifted the sleeping baby off the couch and walked with Donna to her car. I couldn't hear their words from where I sat, but Mac kissed his daughter on the cheek and waved as she drove away.

When he came back into the house, he reached for his pipe and lit up. His narrow mustache made a straight line across his pale upper lip. He sat next to me, picked up the pencil, and wrote "blue" in number four across.

"She left her husband," Mac said. "Caught him messing around with another woman. I don't know how she's going to make it. She can't work with all those kids."

The way Donna managed her surroundings at twenty-one ten while supervising her family had impressed me. "I'll bet she can," I said. "She's tough."

"That she is," he agreed. "But she isn't using her head. Donna's mother gives her bad advice. I don't like her staying there. Ida tells her to go on welfare until she gets on her feet. That's crazy. Donna would be better off if she'd look the other way. Brian likes an occasional fling, but he has a good heart and he loves those kids. Donna has never wanted for a thing. If she weren't so proud, she could stay home, take care of her family, and live comfortably."

I understood Mac's thinking, although life's experiences made me question his conclusions. I saw Donna succeeding as a single parent super-mom. She would show the older generation that she could meet the challenge and keep her pride.

I wondered if Mac thought that I'd have been better off if I had stayed married. I had abandoned the fifties way of thinking, but Mac

was stuck. He never would understand that her husband's infidelity made Donna feel inferior. Her self-esteem was at stake.

The clock chimed one. Virginia usually arrived home from church before eleven, and the house seemed empty without her. "Where's your sister?" I asked.

Mac shook his head. "She's in New Mexico. Mike flew up here and took Virginia back with him."

"Why did he do that?"

"Sandy's dead. The voices got to her. She killed herself."

Sobering Thoughts

I didn't know how to act the night Virginia returned from New Mexico, and apparently, Mac didn't either. He tiptoed around his sister without looking at her and made no complaint about cooking the meal while she did nothing. When he served the spaghetti, he directed his comments to me. "You'll never guess who I saw at the union hall this afternoon,"

Virginia sat like a lump. She didn't even blink.

"I can't guess," I said.

"I saw John. He's still with Lois." Mac laid his pipe on the table close to his elbow.

"And how are they?" Out of the corner of my eye, I observed Virginia who appeared to be miles away.

"They're okay, I guess," Mac said.

"I've often wondered what happened to those two."

"Three now. They have a son."

"Really! That's good news," I said.

"He signed on with a company from Argentina. John thinks Argentina will put a safe distance between them and Lois's ex. That man ain't the forgiving kind."

"Probably true," I said, my attention divided between Mac's story and the numb expression on his sister's face. Virginia bowed her

head in silent prayer while twisting a corner of her napkin into a long thin point.

"Blue was Sandy's favorite color," she blurted out.

Mac and I looked up in surprise. "You miss her, don't you?" I said, but Virginia didn't respond. Her vacant eyes made no contact with ours; she didn't know we were there.

That abrupt declaration was the last time I heard Virginia speak Sandy's name. After dinner, Mac and I walked around her to clear the table, and then he helped her to her room. Religious music came through the walls long into the night.

Mac and I stayed in the guest room. The flickering TV cast wraith-like shadows on the ceiling as Barbara Mandrel and her sisters entertained from a stage in Nashville. I fell into a troubled sleep and dreamed about a poker game. One slow-motion poker player at a coffin-shaped table waited for the dealer to toss the cards through the air into their hands. A bearded man smoking a pipe bet everything on the turn of one card. Next to him, a faded blonde rocked forward and back, holding her cards close to her chest, staring at the ceiling where a faceless player floated away. The fourth player cashed in her chips, and they all wept.

The following Monday, I attended a conference for county staff on campus. When I entered the conference center lobby, I looked around for a familiar face and saw Walt standing alone at a display table. A row of exhibits lined the walls and extended down the hall. Walt was taking it all in.

I hadn't seen him since I left Curry County, and I was curious about Gold Beach gossip. Walt caught my eye, and between handshakes and verbal greetings, we moved toward each other.

Walt looked thinner and taller than I remembered, but he didn't frighten me like he had when I was working in Curry County.

"How do you like Hood River?" he asked.

"I like it fine. Harold's a good boss," I said, "but I miss Gold Beach."

Walt seemed friendlier than when he supervised me.

"Do you ever see Vera?" I inquired.

"No, but my wife sees her now and then. She's well. At her age, her good health is remarkable."

We chatted on about Sheriff Rice and his encounters with outsiders. The Red and White Cafè was struggling and might go out of business The Music Box had moved to a larger location, nice but without the ocean view. I wanted to ask about the monkey tree, but Walt didn't know about that part of my stay in Gold Beach, and I had no desire to tell him.

Auditorium doors opened and a ceremonious welcome launched three days of intensive training. I listened to experts explain the science and psychology of alcoholism. Scenes from the past flashed across my mind; drunken parties, fear of highway accidents, stinging red hot embarrassment from being married to a weekend alcoholic. I identified with the practical definition of a co-dependent. "The alcoholic makes poor choices when he's drinking," said a speaker, "and when he sobers up, he forgets what happened, but the co-dependent goes through life stark raving sober."

I had gone through twenty years of "stark raving sober," and I vowed to never do that again. While listening to the lecturer, it hit me that Mac drank as much or more than my ex-husband. Was I involved in another co-dependent relationship? The thought gave me a chill.

The speaker went on to say that the amount one drinks is less important than how a person's drinking habits influence their associations. By the end of the week, I was convinced that alcohol had caused my divorce, but Mac wasn't like my first husband. When Mac drank, he was himself, and he treated me appropriately.

Mac would be amused when I told him what I'd been learning. He'd want to know how the so-called experts got so smart. I put an assessment tool in my purse.

I met Mac in Portland for dinner on my way home from the conference. Since my training was so fresh, I noticed what we drank. Mac started with Tanqueray on the rocks with three olives, and I drank coffee. Mac ordered a bottle of Cabernet. I drank a few sips and set it aside.

"Something wrong with the wine?" he asked.

"No it's very good, and that's the problem."

"How can good wine be a problem?"

"It's what I learned this week. It's spoiling my dinner."

"That's terrible!" Mac teased. "What did you learn?"

"I learned how to identify traits of alcoholism," I said.

Mac chuckled, finished his glass of wine, and poured another. "My, but that sounds serious." He reached over the table and took my hand. "But you don't need to worry about your work now."

His charm warmed my heart and I wanted to smile. The hand over mine was affectionate and playful. It was then that I noticed that

Mac had lost weight. Why hadn't I seen that before? Alcoholics are often thin, and Mac fit the profile. I shook my head. Too much of the conference had stuck between my ears, and I was over-reacting. Mac's weight was just fine.

"When I think about what I learned, the wine looks threatening," I said.

"Forget it. It's time to relax. You've done your work for this week."

"It isn't easy to forget."

Mac grinned. "I might as well listen. You're going to tell me anyway, aren't you?"

I caught his eye and smiled. "Yes, let me get this off my chest. This is the capsule version. By public health standards, we drink too much."

"I drink too much," he said. "You don't. Construction workers are unionized drunks," Mac chuckled.

"Some of you are alcoholics."

The expression on Mac's face changed from amusement to annoyance. "How would you know?"

I reached in my purse. "I don't know, but I brought the handout we used at the conference. It defines the standards."

Mac reached for the flyer. "Let me see that thing." He read it from start to finish, laid it on the table, picked up, and reread it. "You don't believe this stuff, do you?"

"Well, yes," I said cautiously, "It makes sense to me."

Mac slapped the flyer down. "It's a bunch of crap! Anyone who drinks does these things, even you."

I went down the checklist. Only one or two traits applied to me, but most of them fit Mac's drinking habits. It was obvious; Mac was an alcoholic. I immediately wanted to unlearn what I had just learned, but knowledge doesn't go backwards. I felt heartsick.

Mac took his pipe out of his pocket and leaned back in his chair. "I saw one thing on that list that bothers me," he said with a far away look in his eye.

"Something from this?" I picked up the flyer. "Which one?"

"The one about blackouts. It struck a cord."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me tell you what happened when Virginia was in New Mexico." Mac filled his pipe with fresh tobacco and I waited for his story. Once the pipe burned to his satisfaction, he continued. "I went out to breakfast with my friend, Dave. I told him that I had to leave early to do my laundry. When I returned to the house, clean clothing sat on my bed, folded and ready to be put away. I must have done it. No one else could have. But I have no memory of it. Still don't."

"That's called a blackout," I said.

"I know, and blackouts are a sign of alcoholism."

"Since you know that, what do you think you should do about it?"

"Nothing," Mac said.

"Nothing? Why nothing? Don't you want to know if you are an alcoholic? There are treatment programs and support groups. If you find out that you are an alcoholic, you could get help."

Mac bristled. "Even if I knew that I needed help, I wouldn't sit with a bunch of pricks and talk about how much I drink."

When Mac dismissed the possibility of getting help, I had the co-dependent urge to plead, beg, and insist that he change. I felt I had lost points in a game. Then I remembered a speaker saying that people usually go through a period of denial before they admit they have a drinking problem. "If you don't need help, then why do you drink so much?" I asked.

"Because it's fun, and the right drink says 'class' like nothing else can." He lifted his wine glass. "The container is important too. Can you imagine wine in a beer mug? Heretical!" He shook his head. "And I don't buy just any wine for you, sweetheart. This one is Beaulieu Vineyard's Cabernet Sauvignon, first class."

I was confused. Mac used flashy drinks like he used his money clip, to impress. It was obvious that he didn't think he had a problem, not uncommon for alcoholics in denial, but it wasn't my place to diagnose. I was thinking like a co-dependent.

I needed to know how to deal with my problem. When I returned to Hood River, I made arrangements to attend an AlAnon meeting, but on the threshold of the session, I hesitated. I felt like a fool repeating a lesson once learned. An AlAnon meeting wouldn't change a thing. I would stay with Mac as long as he treated me well, and I didn't want to learn anything more.

Miles Apart

I had run the tires off my Pinto. The transmission was about to go, and the brakes were inadequate to the hills around the Hood River courthouse. My teaching assignments took me all over north central Oregon, sometimes into isolated locations, miles from a telephone. I needed a reliable car.

I talked to Mac about looking for a new one, but he ignored me. I chose to use his disinterest as an opportunity, and for the first time in my life, I went car shopping alone. The choices made me dizzy, and the listed prices challenged my budget. The cheapest new car in Hood River was a burnt orange 1982 Datsun 210, a special deal. I figured that half my car payment would come from savings on gasoline, the other half from anticipated raises, so I bought it.

Darrell and Lea Ann, who spent the weekend with me, stood in the driveway, looking at it thoughtfully as I backed out of the garage. Darrell walked around the orange box, kicking tires and slamming doors. He looked under the hood, dropped it shut, and turned to me. "One good thing about your car," he said. "Nobody will want to steal it."

"It's something I can afford," I said defensively, and I drove the car back into the garage and pulled the door closed with my children standing outside.

Earlier, Mac had taken a job in Klamath Falls, one with less authority than in Gold Beach, but he had looked for over a year and found nothing better. His friend Harry in Phoenix knew the project manager and recommended Mac to him.

"Who is this Harry you talk about so much?" I asked.

"He and another supervisor worked on the New Jersey project with me. About once a month, we'd meet to compare notes, and then we'd party for the rest of the night. We had some wild times." Mac shook his head. "But Harry never forgot that he was married. He and his wife had a good thing. I've always admired him for that."

Mac's admiration of a good marriage surprised me.

"Besides, Harry has a head on his shoulders. He dealt with all kinds of people from gangsters to politicians, and he kept my ass out of a sling a number of times. I wouldn't have wanted to be in New Jersey without him."

The first Friday in December, I presented a program in Bend. When I finished, I realized that I was closer to Mac than I was to my empty apartment. I had no plans for the weekend, an infrequent luxury, so I packed the slide projector and boxes of program flyers into my new car and headed south.

Highway 97 rolled out like a black carpet, spreading ahead of me over miles and miles of sagebrush and juniper. I met an occasional car, but most of the way, I was alone in the middle of nowhere.

I flew over the first few miles under clear skies and dry pavement. Daylight faded, and heavy fog crept onto the highway like a covey of ghosts, little thin wraiths at first and then full-bodied apparitions. By the time I reached the outskirts of Klamath Falls, I

could see a distance of no more than a car length. I almost lost control on a splotch of black ice, and I slowed down to a crawl.

I had directions to Mac's place, but I couldn't see the road signs. By the time I found the right trailer park, a layer of ice had formed a slippery skin over everything. I had trouble staying vertical when I walked from the car to the manager's office.

A greasy round man slept, balanced on the back legs of a folding chair with his feet resting on a cluttered desk. He rattled the room with a thunderous snore, then gasped, removed a black felt hat from his face, and sat upright. He put one foot and then the other on the floor.

"Can you tell me which space is rented to Donald McElder?" I asked.

"Who's that?"

"We call him Mac," I said.

"Oh him," the man grunted. "There. Number twelve, but he ain't home."

"Will he be home soon?" I asked.

The man leaned forward. One large arm lay on the desk, its sleeve soaking up the last ooze of spilled coffee. He looked at me like I was from the IRS. "Lady, I don't know. He don't tell me nothin'."

"I thought you might know. Sorry to bother you." On my way out, I ignored, as best I could, the array of pictures of naked women on the walls. "Thanks for nothing," I mumbled.

I waited in my car knowing I couldn't stay there all night, but I couldn't drive on icy roads either. My spontaneous change-of-plan wasn't working. Mac might not return to the trailer. On a Friday night

in a town like Klamath Falls, Mac would be sitting at a bar, waiting for some lonely woman to sit down next to him.

Mac and I had been seeing each other for more than two years, and I had no evidence to support my suspicion that he was unfaithful, but I knew Mac well enough to know that I wouldn't find out even if he had a dozen loves in the closet. Mac made no promises. That way he didn't break any. It was foolhardy to think he'd be home anytime soon.

I had to find a place to stay, and I remembered seeing a motel on my way into town. I was about to drive out of the parking lot when I saw the Lincoln slide into the space next to Mac's trailer. Mac hauled his lunch bucket out of the car and started up the walk. He turned as if aware that something was different, stopped to study the icy night images, and then he peered across a row of parked cars, through the fog, in my direction.

I stepped out of the car.

"Patricia?"

"Hi Mac."

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to surprise you," I said.

"Well you certainly did that. The roads are slick as snot. How'd you stay out of the ditch?"

We stepped cautiously as we approached each other, aware of the ice beneath our feet. "It's the new car. It has front-wheel drive."

Mac gave the car a glance but said nothing.

"Besides, I know how to drive," I said.

"Apparently you do, but I wish you hadn't taken such a chance."

I remembered a discussion from another time when I was warning him about safe driving. Now he was scolding me. We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"I'll bet a C-note that I know what you're laughing about," he said.

"No bet. I'd lose."

Mac took my arm. "I'd kiss you, but I've been working all day, and I feel filthy. Probably smell like a Billy goat." He turned to look at the Datsun. "I know that you wanted me to help you pick out a car. I guess I should have."

The trailer had been without heat during the day, and I shivered with the cold. Mac's boots were muddy and his denim coveralls were wet from the knees down. He must have been freezing. His beard needed trimming and his eyes lacked the usual teasing luster.

"It's sure good to see you," he said, "but I can't give you much time. I'm working twelve-hour shifts this weekend, and I have to be on the job by six in the morning."

I felt awkward. I should have asked him before showing up, but I had missed him so much that I took a chance. At least he seemed happy to see me, but he clearly needed sleep more than he needed me. I looked around for things to do that would make his life easier. I washed the dishes and straightened clutter.

Mac came out of the shower wrapped in a terry robe. He opened a cabinet and reached for a glass and a bottle of V.O. He downed the last drink and dropped the empty into a trash can. I wondered if he had more. Alcoholics seldom let themselves get down

to the last swallow. Maybe Mac had less of a problem than I suspected.

"If the roads were better, I'd take you out to dinner." He opened an empty refrigerator, stared as if wishing for something to appear, and then he went to a cupboard that was nearly as empty and retrieved two cans of clam chowder. "This is the best I can offer. He searched behind cereal boxes and found a bag of potato chips." He held it up. "Dessert," he said.

"Sounds delicious."

Mac opened the cans and dumped the contents into a saucepan.

"I can buy groceries for you tomorrow if you want me to. Looks like you need almost everything," I said.

Mac looked relieved. "Bless you! That would be nice."

We devoured the emergency rations and fell asleep in each other's arms.

When I awoke the next morning, Mac was gone, but there was a note on the table. "Nice surprise," it said. "Hope your pumpkin is the carriage you've always wanted." Under the note was Mac's grocery list and a hundred dollar bill. "Keep the change," the note said.

When the sun had thawed the roads, I went grocery shopping, but I left the hundred on the table. Mac needed it more than I did. It was two in the afternoon when I began the two-hundred-eighty-mile trip to Hood River. The roads were empty. My life was empty, and I worried about Mac working in the cold and wet for twelve-hour stretches seven days a week.

As I drove up the highway, I noticed a stand of young evergreens on the roadside. Christmas was two weeks away, and I would be spending the holidays alone in a three-bedroom apartment without Mac. My children planned to be in Lebanon with their father. Most of the little trees by the road were less than three feet tall, growing where the highway department would eventually cut them down. A Christmas tree would cheer me up. I stopped the car and used nail clippers, the only cutting tool I could find, to saw the little tree's trunk. I tossed it into the back seat atop boxes from Friday's presentation and headed north. The evergreen smell filled the car and I felt better.

When I got home, I positioned the miniature Christmas tree in a flowerpot where a deceased geranium once lived. I found one red ornament and stuck it on the tree. The spindly evergreen looked sad. I felt sad, and I worried about Mac, alone in a strange town, cold, tired, and hungry.

Christmas Eve

"Mac's in the hospital. Come quick." Virginia hung up.

I held the dead phone to my ear, screaming, "What happened, Virginia? Virginia, answer me!"

Mac's mother had said, "Sister is a little different," and that was true, but I needed information. The rush in Virginia's voice told me more than her words.

I stuffed an overnight bag with basics, threw the bag into the Datsun, and was on the road in ten minutes. I had no details, just a plea to "come quick."

I pressed the accelerator to the floor. Virginia asked me to come. That meant that Mac was in a hospital nearby, probably Portland. He hadn't been taking care of himself. He might have pneumonia like once before.

No, he would have gone to a medical facility near Klamath Falls if he were sick. He was sent or taken to Portland because he needed specialized care, something not available in a small hospital, something that couldn't wait.

I looked down at the speedometer. Ninety? Driving that fast could get me killed. I slowed down and took several deep breaths. Ninety long minutes later, the erector-set profile of the Columbia River Bridge rose above the road. I crossed into Washington and almost missed the freeway exit to Fourth Plain Avenue. Every traffic

light turned red one car length ahead of me. By the time I reached twenty-one ten, my nerves were a jangle. I barely slowed down when I skimmed by the mailbox, jumped the curb, and came to a stop on the sidewalk. Virginia ran out of the house, her coat covering half her cotton housedress. She climbed into my car, tugging on her lose sleeve. "Emanuel." she mumbled,

I strained to hear. "Excuse me. Did you say Emanuel, the hospital?"

"Air lifted. Accident."

Virginia's enigmatic answers fueled my annoyance. "Was he air lifted to Emanuel because of an accident?" She looked out the window as if she didn't hear me. "What happened, Virginia?" I put the car in reverse and started to back the car out of the drive.

"He'll be mad with me for telling, but I did the right thing this time. I know I did." Her wild wringing of hands said she believed otherwise.

I slammed on the brake and grabbed her arm. "What happened?" I shouted.

Virginia jumped, and her wide eyes puddled up. Her lips moved but nothing came out.

I turned my hands palms up. "Well?"

"He fell."

"Yes, go on!"

She twisted a button on her coat until I thought it would pop. She drew back and mumbled,"On ice."

"He fell on the ice? Where? Was he working when he fell?"

She nodded. Strands of faded blonde hair slid over her eyes. "At work." She was listening to me now. She released the button and

looked at me. “Carrying something. Slipped and fell.” Her mouth closed into a sour pucker and she swallowed. “Can fix him at Emanuel.”

Virginia couldn’t tell me, but she knew what happened, and I knew nothing. “How did you find out?” I asked.

“Dave.”

“Who’s Dave?”

“His friend. He paints cars.”

“Did you see Mac?”

“Yes, Dave took me. The chopper just got there.” She looked up at me with frightened eyes. “I’m afraid for him.” She hung her head. “He’s hurt bad.”

I pulled into the street, took the reverse route down Fourth Plain Avenue, and entered the freeway. Traffic over the Interstate Bridge was stop-and-go. “Jesus!” I cursed. “Not now!”

Virginia looked horrified. “Patricia, no! Not on Christmas Eve.” She folded her hands and closed her eyes. “Forgive her, Jesus. She didn’t mean to take Thy name in vain.”

“I’ll speak to Jesus on my own behalf,” I snapped. “I don’t need a mediator.”

Virginia hung her head.

I wished I could erase my harsh words. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I love Jesus too.” It was enough to stop the tears from welling in her eyes.

As soon as we crossed the Columbia River, I left the congestion of Interstate Five and took the Marine Drive exit. We crisscrossed North Portland to the Emanuel Hospital.

In the hospital lobby, a small choral group sang old English carols in front of a blue and white Christmas tree, a solemn statement of celebration at a critical time. If I had not been worried before, the morose expressions on the carolers' faces would have convinced me to take the situation seriously.

We checked at the main desk and found our way to Mac's room. We were about to open his door when a nurse stopped us.

"See the sign? No visitors," she pointed to an index card under the door number. "Patient's request."

I glanced at the closed door. "Why would Mac do that, Virginia?"

"He's mad with me because I told Ronnie, but he wants to see you. I know he does." Virginia shifted her weight from one foot to the other, giving her the rocking motion that seemed to comfort her.

The nurse looked at a chart, tapped her pencil against the edge of her clipboard, and went to a phone. She kept her eye on me while she talked. After she hung up, she sucked in air, stood erect, and marched back to us. "Are you Patricia?" she asked.

"Yes, and this is Mac's sister, Virginia."

The nurse gave Virginia an icy glare, and her eyes narrowed in on me. "He told us no visitors except for Patricia." She opened the door for me, and then she turned to Virginia. "You stay here."

"Yes, ma'am." Virginia looked at the floor. "He's mad with me, isn't he?"

The nurse raised her eyebrows and made a note on her chart. "Five minutes," she said to me. "No longer."

I cautiously entered Mac's private room. Dim light came through the narrow frosted glass window opposite his bed, the only

furniture in the small room. The windowsill held a yellow plastic pitcher and a matching set of vomit trays. Mac lay on his back, knees slightly raised, covered with a light cotton blanket. The temperature in the room felt like a summer heat wave, a decided contrast to his cold trailer in Klamath Falls. He turned toward me with slow deliberate movements. His face was gray and his words were mushy. "Hi sweetheart," he whispered. "Merry Christmas."

I couldn't speak. The sting of tears burned behind my eyelids. I stood close to his bed and held his limp hand. He winced. "You're hurting," I said.

"Just had a shot. Soon I'll be feeling nothing." The wrinkles around his eyes stood out black against the ashen color of his weathered skin.

"Did you come by yourself?"

"Virginia's here," I said.

Mac cringed. "Keep her away."

I was taken aback. "All right, but why?"

"She preaches. Can't stand it!"

"She cares about you."

"I know, but the crazies get to me." Mac twisted. "I need a drink. You don't happen to have a pint in that purse, do you?"

I shook my head. "No, Mac, I don't, and I'm sure your doctor wouldn't approve if I brought you booze."

A tiny smile curled the corners of Mac's thin lips. "I can dream," he teased.

Seeing Mac alive and coherent reduced my immediate anxiety, and I smiled, but there was so much I didn't know. "It's not likely I'll

bring you a drink the next time either." I squeezed his hand. "Tell me what happened?"

"I got hurt. That's all." His eyes shifted, avoiding mine.

"How? I'd like to know." I took a deep breath and put the calm back in my voice.

He spoke to the wall. "I was carrying a load of steel rods when I slipped on a patch of ice."

I watched his eyes. He acted ashamed. "Why'd they bring you here?" I asked.

"The only doc that works on injuries like mine operates out of this hospital. I broke my back, and he's going to wire me back together Monday morning."

Mac looked at the blank window, the wall, the bed, but not at me. I didn't understand his evasiveness. "Something else?" I asked.

"Doc says no more construction work."

Mac would have no identity if he couldn't work. That would be a bigger adjustment than a stiff back.

He spoke into the pillow. "First class, or not at all," he mumbled.

"What's that?"

"I won't live like a god-damned cripple," he said. "I'll kill myself first."

His words struck me like a fist to the stomach. "You're hurting, Mac. You'll feel different after the operation."

He gave me a side-glance, and grimaced. "Yeah! Sure!"

"Don't get discouraged. Give yourself time to heal." As I stroked the back of his hand, I wondered if the Colt Commander was still in the glove box in his car. "Where's the Lincoln?"

"K Falls. Dave and his wife are down there now. They'll pull the trailer back, tomorrow."

I had not met Dave, and I understood why Mac would ask for his help, but learning that Mac was able to make arrangements to have his precious Lincoln towed to his side, but he wasn't able to call me, made me bristle.

The medication took effect and Mac's eyes closed, opened, and closed again. I kissed him on the cheek. "I'll see you in the morning," I said. He didn't hear me. He was asleep.

Virginia sat on a bench near the elevator. A woman approached who made me think of Donna, Mac's daughter. "Do his children know about the accident?" I asked Virginia.

"Ronnie knows. He said he'd try to see his dad today. Virginia hung her head. "Mac's mad with me 'cause I told Ronnie."

"He's in pain, Virginia, he doesn't mean it." Virginia didn't need to know that Mac had asked me to keep her away from him. "Are you ready to go home?"

"All right."

We left the hospital through the main lobby, passing the same group of grim carolers who met us on the way in.

On the drive back to Virginia's place, my mind was on what Mac might do if surgery failed to eliminate the pain, or worse, if he required a wheelchair. I didn't take his remark about refusing to be a cripple lightly. He meant what he said.

At twenty-one ten, a rusty brown Chevrolet occupied my place in the drive, and I parked on the street. I should have known who

owned that car. I had seen it some place before, but try as I might, I couldn't remember.

"Oh, thank Jesus," Virginia said. "Ronnie's home."

My stomach turned. The paint can in the garage and Mac's critical assessment of his son flashed back to me. I had seen Ronnie's car the day I left Gold Beach. That was why it looked familiar.

"Mac and Ronnie don't get along," Virginia said, "but Ronnie's found Jesus. He's going to marry a nice Christian girl. He's saved now." A full smile lit up her round freckled face.

I couldn't argue with salvation, but I didn't trust Ronnie. I entered the house prepared to meet a monster.

Ronnie sat at the dining table reading a science fiction paperback, his light brown hair slicked back into a ducktail. Too-big camouflage fatigues with cargo pockets covered his muscular frame. Large hands with clean fingernails placed a bookmark in the novel and laid it on the table. Ronnie stood, hugged his aunt, and turned to me. "You must be Patricia," he said, extending his hand in greeting. His voice was deep and smooth, like Mac's. "Virginia has been telling me about you."

I shook his hand, feeling the grip of a self-confident man. Had my original impression of him been too negative?

He gave me a second look. "Have we met before? You look familiar."

I didn't want to discuss that fateful goodbye in Gold Beach. "I don't think so," I answered.

Ronnie cocked his head and stood with legs crossed while leaning against the table. "Have you seen Dad?"

"We were just there," Virginia said, "at the hospital."

"How is he? They wouldn't let me see him, and nobody would tell me anything."

Virginia shook her head. "I'm afraid for him. He needs Jesus, but he doesn't want Him." She folded her hands and closed her eyes.

Ronnie raised an eyebrow and looked my way.

"I don't think we'll know how he is until after the surgery," I said.

"When's that?" Ronnie asked.

"Mac said Monday morning."

Ronnie put his arm around Virginia, "We can pray for him whether he wants it or not. For now, do you need any help?"

Virginia shifted her weight and looked at the floor. "I don't know."

"I'll drop in from time to time. We can decide what to do when Dad's ready to come home," he said.

Ronnie's tenderness toward Virginia surprised me. Maybe the white powder in the paint can was a cleaning product or something equally innocent. We didn't know for sure that it was an illegal drug, and we didn't know for sure that it belonged to Ronnie. Mac assumed so because Ronnie had been sleeping in the garage.

Ronnie and Virginia chatted back and forth about everyday things, the price of coffee, the weeds at the back door, about Mac's fastidious expectations. They got along so well that I wondered if Mac had caused the problems in the household rather than Ronnie.

"I'll pick you up Monday morning," Ronnie said. "We can be there during Dad's surgery. When he gets back to his room, he'll probably kick me out, but we're family; we have a right to know."

Ronnie shot a look my way that I interpreted as comment on the preferential treatment I'd been given at the hospital.

"Where are you staying?" Virginia asked him.

"Oh, I'll find a place." He winked at Virginia and left the house. "See you." he called on the way out. Seconds later, the rusty Chevrolet vibrated down the street.

With Ronnie's car gone, I moved my Datsun next to the house and unloaded the few items I brought with me.

It was late and I was exhausted, so I told Virginia good night and went to bed. I planned to go to the hospital the next morning, so when I awoke at four and couldn't go back to sleep, I got dressed and packed my bag. I was ready to return to Hood River after visiting Mac.

It was a crisp dark morning. I put my things in the car, and then I glanced around the yard. Under the streetlight, I noted a hole in a flowerbed where an animal had been digging. That would be just the kind of thing that would upset Mac, and it would be the first thing he'd see when he came home from the hospital. I went to the garage for a rake to smooth the spot.

I opened the side door and peered into the shadowy cavern. I couldn't find the light-switch, but I knew where the rake hung, so I walked across the room in semi-darkness. The door swung closed behind me. I didn't remember that door being off balance. It clicked shut. I could see nothing but black.

Wanting to avoid falling over a box or misplaced equipment, I touch-toed my way across the floor, but something wasn't right. I had an eerie sixth sense that I wasn't alone. I peered into the darkness, hoping my eyes would adjust to the penetrating wall of night.

"What are you doing out here?" a deep voice growled in my face.

My heart stopped. "Ronnie? I didn't know you were here. I was looking for a tool."

He grabbed me and pushed me against the wall. "Honey, I have just the tool you need." Ronnie's voice was harsh and mean, like an angry drunk. "The old man isn't much good to you now, is he? So you came to see me." I felt his breath in my face. "I know what you want."

"I didn't know you were here." My stomach churned and I felt small. I was no match for Ronnie. Flashes of mutilated rape victims chilled my blood. What would he do to me? Hot tears welled in my eyes and my shoulders hurt where his fingers dug into my flesh.

Ronnie's breath reeked of something rotten, and I turned my head away. He chuckled softly as if contemplating his next move. I squirmed to escape, but he shoved me so hard into the wall that I felt dizzy. My stomach turned when he ran his hand under my sweater. I trembled in fear, which only encouraged him.

"So you like that," he said.

"Please stop," I begged.

He laughed and snapped the button off my skirt.

Suddenly, light flooded the room. Virginia, in her nightgown, stood in the doorway like a sleepwalker, staring at us with blank eyes. "Jesus loves the little children," she sang.

Ronnie spun around like he'd been kicked in the gut. I dashed by the two of them, ran to my car, and left as fast as the Datsun would take me. I looked to my left and saw Ronnie's brown Chevrolet parked on the trailer pad, out of sight from the house.

Still shaking, I headed down the freeway toward Hood River. I was approaching Troutdale when I realized what I was doing. I pulled off at a truck stop and parked. With the motor running and my foot on the brake, I took several deep breaths.

Once I quit hyperventilating, I went into the coffee shop to rest a few minutes and calm my nerves. I needed to think. Mac would be expecting me, and I didn't want him to think that I didn't care. Ronnie and Virginia planned to be at the hospital on Monday morning but nothing was said about visiting Mac today. I didn't want to see Ronnie again – ever, but I did want to see Mac. I returned to my car and backtracked to Emanuel.

The hospital was open but essentially deserted. Everyone must have been celebrating Christmas morning somewhere else. My shoulders hurt, I felt dirty, and I worried that Mac would ask me why I looked so disheveled. The ladies' room provided the opportunity to put myself back together. I ran water over my face and washed my hands, but Ronnie's smell clung to my clothing. I wanted to rip that smell from my body. I regretted leaving Hood River so quickly that the only clothing I had was on my back. I wrapped my coat around me and entered Mac's room wearing my best imitation of "cheerful."

Mac looked better than the day before, but his slow movements and tight expression showed his pain. "Hello sweetheart," he said weakly. "You're here early."

"I'm going back to Hood River this morning." I hoped he wouldn't ask why, because I didn't have an answer other than my intention to avoid Ronnie. He might show up in spite of his father's request for no visitors. I attempted a lighthearted attitude. Mac saw through it right away.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing." I couldn't look at him.

"Did you stay at the house last night?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Was Ronnie there?'

I nodded.

Mac studied my face. "Did he do something that upset you?"

My mouth dropped open. He knew his son better than I imagined. Tears spilled over my cheeks and rolled onto the sheet in his bed.

He looked at me with furrowed brow. "What did he do?" he asked.

I stood over him mumbling, not able to say.

Mac studied my face. A few key phrases escaped my lips, enough for him to guess correctly. His eyes squinted and his mouth curved downward. "That bastard! I'll kill him."

I had to pull myself together for his sake. He had enough to worry about without getting upset over my troubles. "Ronnie didn't hurt me; just scared me. I'm all right," I said in the calmest voice I had left. "Virginia showed up at just the right time."

Mac raised his eyebrows. "She has a knack for surprises." He shook his index finger at me. "Don't go back to twenty-one ten unless you're with me. It isn't safe. Do you understand?"

I nodded. He didn't have to tell me twice.

I agonized the next two days while waiting for Mac's surgery. I could only imagine what the wait must have been for him. Would he be able to function as usual or would he live in a wheelchair for the

rest of his life? I left work early Monday afternoon and arrived at the hospital just as the staff began clearing dinner trays from patients' rooms.

"Hello sweetheart," Mac said as I walked through the door.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw normal color in his face.

"Did you bring a bottle with you this time?" he joked.

"No, I didn't. I told you I wouldn't the last time you asked." Hearing his light-hearted question told me he would be well soon. I could stop worrying, at least for now. The painful grimace was gone and he didn't flinch when I kissed him. "Tell me about the surgery. What did they do?"

"They fused two vertebrae and froze the nerves to reduce the pain. My doc says that after a good physical therapy program, I'll be good as new except I won't have much flexibility. That's the good news."

"Is there bad news?"

"I'll have to get a different job, one that's easier on my back."

I almost welcomed the announcement that he couldn't return to construction work. Ever since Gold Beach, I had been worried that he might get hurt, and he did. If he never worked on a power line again, I'd be happy.

I envisioned a new life for Mac. Vocational training could provide Mac with the opportunity for a real education. If he took advantage of that opportunity, the common thread could bring us even closer together.

I watched Mac's weathered face smiling at me from the hospital bed. I glanced at his gnarled hands resting on the thin cotton

blanket and considered his quick and sometimes crude wit. He'd have no trouble getting a degree if he chose to put his mind to the task.

Mac began to tire, so I picked up my things to leave. "I'll call you tomorrow," I promised.

"I don't have a phone. When I get out of here, I'll call you."

Mac had an attitude that would get him through anything. As usual, he had to be in charge, even when it involved something as simple as a phone call. I understood him well enough to appreciate his need for privacy. It would take restraint, but I could honor his request and let him make the first call. His jokes and lighthearted talk assured me that he loved life. Earlier thoughts of suicide were gone.

Adjustments

The phone sat silent on my nightstand for days. I began to dial Mac's number several times, thought better of it, and stopped. By now, he'd be home, unless there were complications in his recovery. He said he'd call, and he would, in time. Being patient took restraint.

Just before a three-day workshop in Portland, my phone rang. "You probably thought I'd forgotten all about you," Mac said.

"I was wondering." I was sure he could hear the lilt in my voice. "How have you been?"

"I'm getting better, slowly. I'd like to see you, but I can't drive to Hood River. Could you come to Portland? Maybe stay in a motel for a night or two?"

"I'll be at the Red Lion next week. I could register for an extra day and you could meet me there ."

"I'm not supposed to drive," he said, "but I could ask Dave to take me that far. Could you bring me home?

"Sure."

"Do you know where the Red Lion Quiet Bar is?"

"It's the one just off the main lobby, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"I remember seeing it when I attended a conference once before. What time will you be there?"

"About six. Will your meetings be over then?"

"Oh, yes. By that time, most everyone will be on their way home."

"Six on Friday it is then."

I was so excited that I ran around in circles, trying to pack just the right clothing, basic blah for the conference and black lace for Mac. Maybe it was too soon, but I hoped Mac was well enough to consider making love.

The week dragged, and I barely remembered a word of the conferences. Finally, I was walking through an archway defined by purple and pink neon tubes, the entrance to the Quiet Bar. Soft classical music dignified the subdued atmosphere, and patrons talked in hushed tones at linen covered tables. I looked for a man alone. When I saw the wavy gray hair, manicured beard and mustache, and the distinctive profile, a thrill quickened my step. Mac looked his best, and his careful grooming encouraged me to think that he was feeling well.

Mac grasped the edge of the table and pulled himself up. When he looked my way, his whole torso turned. "Let me buy you a drink." Mac motioned to the barmaid who brought a glass of red wine and a fresh martini.

I touched my glass to his. "Here's to a new beginning," I said.

He raised his eyebrows and rephrased the toast, "Here's to you and me right now."

That was an unexpected reply. What did he mean? Was he telling me that our future was in question? Maybe that's why he hadn't called. No! It couldn't be that.

Mac's erect posture and deliberate movement conveyed discomfort. Under his chambray shirt, the line of a brace ran from his armpits to his thighs. He smiled and downed his drink. He sat back in his chair in a casual manner, doing his best to show me that he was the same old Mac, but he moved like one suffering from extreme muscle fatigue. I expected to make some adjustments in bed that evening if we got to that point at all.

I wondered how he and Virginia were getting along. Mac had been the one in charge, the one who did most of the work to maintain the house. Now he had to rely on his sister, and that must have required a major change in attitude for both of them. "How are things at home?" I asked.

"Not good. Ronnie's been sleeping in the garage. Virginia told me that she knew he was there the night he attacked you. She said that Jesus guided her out there because you were in trouble." Mac rolled his eyes.

Virginia had been so right. I was glad she had listened to her friend. "She's clever," I said.

Mac nodded. "Sometimes." He picked up his pipe and lit it. "Well, Ronnie's gone now. I had to threaten to call the police to get him to leave. I just hope he took his drugs with him. Now that he's gone, I can have you come to the house. I knew you wouldn't want to as long as Ronnie was around. I have to admit, though, that we would have had a hard time without his help.

We had several drinks while Mac filled me in on the progress at twenty-one ten, his plans for additional transplanting and pruning, the antics of Donna's boys, and his frustration with Virginia. The shadows outside lengthened and the Columbia River turned dark.

"We should order dinner soon so we can go back to my room before it gets too late."

Mac looked at his hands. "I don't know, Patricia. I might not be ready."

"I've missed you. I want to be with you, but we don't have to force anything. We should apply the one day at a time slogan to whatever happens. I want to be near you, and if that's all, it's okay."

Neither of us had much to say during dinner. Mac's eyes darted from one person to the next and he pulled back when I laid my hand over his. "One day at a time," I repeated.

Mac snorted. "Am I that obvious?

I nodded.

He puffed on his pipe, and he ordered a créme-de-menthe. "I haven't been able to relax for a long time." Mac looked around the dining room and smiled. "I have been tied to Virginia and the problems at twenty-one ten for too long. It's good to get away."

The waiter dropped our check on the table and I reached for it, but Mac's hand was quicker than mine. He shook his head. "You never learn, do you?"

When we crossed the threshold into the hotel room, Mac looked around and cautiously closed the door behind us. I put my arms around him, but he felt uninvolved. I almost expected him to ask me to take him home, but he didn't. I pecked him on the cheek and went to the bathroom to change into the black lace.

When I returned to the bedroom, I saw Mac's brace sticking out from behind a chair. He must have tried to hide it, but I would have known he wore a brace from the creases on his naked body. I

embraced him, and this time, I molded my body around his. At first Mac felt tense, and I considered the possibility that he wouldn't respond, but then he lay down and pulled me with him. Nature did the rest. The next twenty minutes restored Mac's faith in his manhood and the fire between us burned as hot as before.

"How's your back?" I asked.

Mac was almost asleep. "Something wrong with my back? I didn't notice."

I giggled, and snuggled close to him. "I'm glad you called."

"Yeah, so am I, but I didn't expect things to go so well." Mac drifted into a deep sleep, but I lay awake, luxuriating in the satisfaction of good sex. A big question had been answered. Mac had enough sexual romps left in him to satisfy both of us for many years.

For the next several weeks, we spent every weekend together, usually at my place in Hood River. We weren't shy about using the spare room at twenty-one ten either, behavior that prompted Virginia to spend hours at her bedside praying for our souls.

Although the surgery repaired Mac's back, and the pain became tolerable, his doctor warned him that the fusion wouldn't hold if he had another fall, and a second surgery wouldn't be an option.

"What are you going to do when you get well?" I asked. "You won't be able to go back to construction work."

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Right now, it's all I can do to keep up with physical therapy and doctors' appointments."

To receive compensation, his insurance required participation in a vocational training program and hours of physical therapy. Mac

spread a briefcase full of pamphlets and application forms across my kitchen table. "I've never known anything but construction work. Now I have to go to school," Mac sputtered. "How ridiculous is that? It'll take at least two years to finish, and I'll be fifty-seven by then."

"How old will you be in two years if you don't go to school?" I asked.

Mac glared at me. He rifled through the pile of papers spread across the table. "There's so damned many. Why don't they just give me disability?"

I ignored his frustration. "Did you finish high school?"

"No, I went into the Navy, but I got a GED."

"So you could begin working on a degree program."

"That's what they tell me."

"And do you want to do that?"

He gazed at the stack of papers while mindlessly curling a folder into a tube. He tapped one flyer and then another. "I have no idea what I want."

I slid my chair up next to him and began looking at the catalogues and pamphlets. Mac frequently quoted from the classics. "When did you first read the *Rubaiyat*?" I asked.

"About ten years ago. I lived next door to a man who taught at the community college. We often shared a drink at the end of the day, and he told me he taught world literature. I was curious and asked him to recommend one of the classics for me to read. He suggested the *Rubaiyat*. When I read parts that I didn't understand, I'd ask him questions. We discussed the lines often enough that I memorized most of the book."

"That was a good experience for you, wasn't it?"

Mac's brow wrinkled. "Yes, it was," he admitted cautiously.

"Have you considered taking a literature class for credit? I think you'd enjoy it." I hoped he'd take classes that would be interesting to me and we could study together. It was a selfish desire, but it could be mutually beneficial.

"I know what you're getting at," Mac added, "and I'd love to be educated. Maybe I could understand you better if I went to school, but it's futile. Educated people don't make the money I do."

"Did," I corrected. "Your back won't allow you to work like you once did. Construction work, for you, is in the past tense." Mac pushed his chair away from the table; his face grew darker by the second. He stomped to the window and glowered, threatening the world below. I thought he might throw something, but he just stared out the window.

After a while, I continued the inquiry. "Did you take any test or talk to a counselor about what you might be qualified to do?"

"Yeah, that stuff's in there." He pointed to a fat manila envelope on the table.

I reviewed the psychological profiles and test results. I found the scores from the vocational interests and aptitude test. "This shows that you have aptitude for electrical work."

"Of course I have aptitude for electrical work! That's what I've been doing for thirty years."

"Maybe you could retrain for work that isn't quite as physical."

"I don't know what that'd be. Even if I wired houses, I'd have to crawl around in attics."

"I see what you mean." I took a second look at the test scores. There are several other high scores: accounting, business economics, political science, and literature. You scored high in literature," I said.

"You sound surprised."

"Not surprised, but literature is something I could help you with. Have you thought about a liberal arts degree?"

"What good would that do me?"

"You could teach, write…"

"Are you out of your head? I couldn't get up in front of a bunch of kids, and I can't write. Why do you think I buy Hallmark cards?"

I had no answer.

"Hallmark says what I can't. That's why." He looked again at the overwhelming pile of community college flyers. He picked one at random. "What's this one, accounting? Yes, accounting it is." He noticed my look of disapproval. "As good as anything," he argued.

"Perhaps, but are you giving this enough thought? This is a decision that will affect years of your life. Is accounting something you'll enjoy?"

Mac sneered. "No, Patricia, it isn't. It's the money I'll enjoy."

It bothered me that Mac had such a monetary view of his opportunity. I hoped his attitude would change once he got into the program, once he had invested a part of himself.

His schoolwork took more time than Mac wanted to spend, and he grumbled with each new assignment. In spite of his negative attitude, he moved through the material quickly. When he ran into trouble, he came to me for help. He often brought his work to my

place in Hood River, and while I was gone during the day, he'd do his assignments which we reviewed in the evening.

I liked having him with me, but he was restless.

"Dave says we need to paint the Mark now that I have some time. He's looking for another car for me to drive."

"Mac, is that a good idea? You have enough to do to keep up with your classes, and working on your car will be hard on your back."

Mac bristled. "I don't plan on sitting on my ass with my nose in a book for the rest of my life. I'm still a man, Patricia, bad back or not."

I didn't understand his outburst. I valued education and I knew it took dedication to complete any program, including an associate degree. I also valued my body, and I would never deliberately risk injury to work on a car, even a car I loved, but Mac would.

My thoughts flashed back to our early days when I saw him carefully clean and polish his precious Lincoln. At that time, I knew how much he loved his car, but after five years of being together, I believed he had changed. Although he never said so, I thought he loved me at least as much as he loved his Mark IV.

Friend or Foe

I leaned on the rake and watched a cotton candy cloud skate ahead of the sun. We had been working in the yard at twenty-one ten when Dave called. While Mac was gone, I raked the flowerbed smooth, forked the cuttings into a pile, and tossed the trash into a wheelbarrow. A gust of hot wind lifted a forkful of debris and tossed dirt and leaves back in my face.

I loved getting outside and mixing it up with nature, getting my hands dirty, feeling my muscles burn with productive exercise. The smell of freshly turned soil brought the farmer out in me and I enjoyed the itch of soil under my fingernails.

Mac had left me in the yard to finish transplanting an azalea so he could answer Dave's request to help him at the body shop. It had become an annoying pattern; Dave would call and Mac would run. I knew why. Dave had promised to paint the Lincoln, and Mac believed that he'd actually do it. I had lost hope long ago. Dave had been using the promise of a paint job as a puppet string ever since the accident nine months ago.

I watched Mac's expression turn to hate each time he looked at the gouge running the full length on the passenger side of his prized Mark IV, and I understood his desire to remove that scar from his past. When Jeanette keyed his Lincoln, she left a wound deeper than the rusty scratch, a visual reminder of their failed marriage.

Before his accident, Mac did the dirty work around his and Virginia's house, but he wasn't able to do everything he had done before, so I picked up the rake and the cause.

Earlier that day, I had told Mac that I wanted to go for a drive, to enjoy the beautiful weather before the fall rains began, perhaps stop at a nursery and buy another shrub. Mac wasn't interested. He had homework to do. He asked me to clean up our project so we could get started on his Monday assignment as soon as he returned from the body shop.

When Mac drove into the yard, he was all smiles, "Dave wants us to meet him at his house today," Mac said.

I looked again at the beautiful sky. "I thought you wanted me to help you with an assignment for tomorrow."

"It can wait. I'd like you to meet Barbara."

"Who's Barbara?"

"Dave's wife."

I brushed a gob of mud from my jeans. "I'll need to change. Why do you want me to meet her?"

"You'll be with her while we're painting the car."

"Did Dave say when?"

"Yep, next Saturday."

"I see, but the only time I see you is on weekends. If you're painting on Saturday, I'll stay with you and watch."

Mac looked confused. "That won't work."

"Why not?"

He took a deep breath. "Dave doesn't allow spectators in the production area."

"But you'll be there. You're a spectator."

"That's different. It's my car."

I didn't understand the logic, but I agreed that I knew nothing about painting cars and I shouldn't be in the way.

I wanted to be with Mac, so I agreed to meet his friends, but I was disappointed that we'd be inside instead of touring the countryside. I glanced once more at the clouds, and then I went inside to change.

On the trip across town, Mac filled me in on Dave and Barbara's history. "She's his second wife, twenty years younger than Dave. Was his office manager before his divorce. Had a gorgeous figure when they married, but she's let herself go. Dave says she'd better slim down or he'll find a replacement like he did with the first one."

"He actually said that?"

"Yeah, and he meant it. He has no use for fat women."

I couldn't believe a man would replace a wife just because of a few pounds. "He's a self-righteous bigot," I said.

"I suppose he is, but he can afford to be."

"Can he? Does bigotry come with an admission fee these days?"

Mac didn't answer. He was concentrating on the street signs. We left the highway at Hazel Dell and entered a residential district where six-foot iron fences locked the world out and the residents in. We stopped at a new split-level house with a green lawn lined with trees. The property reminded me of a golf course. A snarling Doberman ran up and down the fence line, and I had an urge to run for my life.

The dog stopped snarling, perked up his ears, and turned toward the house where a plump dark haired woman blew a whistle that I couldn't hear. The dog turned tail and ran to his mistress.

"That's Barbara," Mac looked around, "and there's Dave."

After learning about Dave's attitudes toward women, I was expecting a middle-aged man with a paunch and graying hair. Instead, the man who came strolling down the concrete path to unlock the gate was handsome: tall, with straight dark hair, and he appeared to be as young as his wife. A light gray T-shirt stretched to accommodate the shoulders of a man who lifted weights. He looked directly at Mac and called a lusty, "Hello, I have that car for you." He turned around and ordered his wife to prepare a snack.

Dave gave me no indication that he saw me. He avoided eye contact and directed his words to Mac and to Mac only. I felt invisible.

Mac took my arm for support. He was too proud to use his cane around Dave. We followed our host down a concrete path lined with yellow chrysanthemums to the garage. He walked so fast that Mac grimaced to keep pace. When we reached the garage, Dave opened the door and motioned for Mac to enter. "Barbara will entertain your lady friend," Dave said, and then he pulled the garage door closed between us. I stood outside, alone, wondering what to do.

At another door, Barbara waved to me. "Over here," she said with the enthusiasm of cold oatmeal. "We'll go in the house until they're finished."

"Where'd they go?"

"Dave's office."

"What for?"

"Something about transferring a title, and other legal matters."

"I see."

Barbara led me up white-carpeted steps and motioned to a conversational corner in a huge living room. Several pieces of plush white furniture made up a congenial seating arrangement. Mirrors lined the wall opposite large windows that opened onto a view of a professionally landscaped backyard. The maples had begun to redden, and a single leaf, eager to lead the charge into autumn, spun gracefully to the ground.

"Have a seat," Barbara reached for a twig that had found its way to the plush carpet. Her round hips strained the seams of her cream colored stretch pants. With thumb and index finger, she removed the irritating interloper. Once satisfied that the carpet was perfect, she gave me a disapproving look, and then she disappeared behind a swinging door, her nose in the air.

I sank into the firmest of the overstuffed chairs, wondering how I would climb out of the engulfing marshmallow. The Doberman lay across the threshold; his teeth bared, an almost audible snarl gurgling in his throat. He watched me with steely eyes, waiting for me to make a wrong move.

I turned away from the dog to the inviting panorama through the windows. Autumn leaves blushed at the breeze that kept them off balance. I could almost hear them say, "I don't want to fall for you, but being what I am, I have no choice." I could identify. The brash wind answered with another gust of hot air, and the leaves danced nervously. Only the risk takers let loose and spun to the ground.

A noise from the hall disturbed my reverie. Barbara pushed a teacart from behind me to the center of the conversational corner. She offered a choice of tea or coffee. I chose coffee. Shortbread and slices

of fruitcake lined a serving plate along with an assortment of candies and nuts. Barbara poured and set my cup on a glass hostess plate, and then she added a piece of shortbread, a slice of fruitcake, and three chocolates. "We bought the chocolates when we were on the island," she said in an affected British accent. "Found the most amazing little confectionery in Victoria. The superiority in her voice let me know she was a cut above me, a tone that set my teeth on edge.

Have you been there?"

"Victoria, B.C? No."

"You simply must go. It is a marvelous city. So British!"

I nibbled at the shortbread. Barbara's cold expression told me that she resented spending her precious time with me. I couldn't blame her. We had nothing in common. I would have been happier raking leaves than sitting in her ostentatious living room eating bonbons, and I'm sure she had better things to do than entertain me.

Barbara devoured the items on her plate and then she took more from the cart. I sipped coffee. The gilded clock on the wall reminded me that only ten minutes had passed. I expected the men to talk for at least half an hour. I could endure the situation for that long, I told myself, but by the time the gold hands on the clock had advanced an hour, I felt like I was drowning in marshmallow cream. Soon the men would return, and Mac and I would leave – I hoped.

An additional twenty minutes later, Dave came up the stairs followed by Mac, grimacing with each step. In my peripheral vision, I watched Dave glance lovingly at himself in each mirror. He stopped before one, removed a comb from his shirt pocket, and smoothed his pompadour. The slick sixties hairstyle dated him more than any other feature.

Mac came across the room and sidled up to me. Behind his hand he whispered, "Don't stare at his hair. He's very self-conscious."

"Why?"

"I'll explain later."

When Dave finished primping, he walked across the room to join Mac. "It may take me a month or more to finish the Lincoln," he said. "Have to work for paying customers first." He put the comb back in his shirt pocket. "The Pontiac doesn't look like much, but it's reliable."

"What's he talking about?" I asked.

"Dave found a car for me to drive while the Lincoln's in the shop. It's out front."

Dave dominated the conversation while I drank one, two, three cups of coffee. Barbara looked bored, and I couldn't keep my eyes off the hair I was told to ignore. When Dave had satisfied his need for us, he stood, the sign we could leave. He led us out of the house and back down the chrysanthemum-lined path. A dented off-white Pontiac waited for us at the curb. It appeared to be at least fifteen years old.

Dave laughed. "Looks like it belonged to a blind Mexican with a three hundred pound wife, doesn't it?"

Mac snorted and I cringed.

"The motor's good, and it gets good mileage," Dave continued. "It doesn't look like much, but it will take you anywhere you want to go. It will do for a few days, won't it?"

I wondered why Mac would agree to drive such a heap. Dave must have promised him something special for him to submit to the shame of driving that pile of dents. When I climbed inside, I sat in a seat so misshapen that I felt metal against my backbone. Mac inserted

the key, pushed the starter button, and mumbled obscenities. When the car lurched forward, he slammed on the brake, stalling the engine.

"Damned stick shift," he cursed under his breath.

"Use the clutch," Dave called.

Mac reddened. I expected him to snap at Dave, but he held his tongue.

"And choke it. It runs a little rough when it's cold." Dave didn't see the look on Mac's face, but I did. I sat next to a man so humiliated that he had forgotten how to drive.

By the time we left the subdivision, Mac had relaxed a little and his driving skills returned. Once we reached the freeway, he had the car responding to his every command.

Thoughts of the vain Dave and the overstuffed Barbara teased my curiosity. "You said you'd tell my why I shouldn't stare at Dave's hair," I said. "Why?"

"It's a hairpiece. Dave's bald." Mac shared this bit of hilarious information with a face as sincere as a priest at a funeral, and I wondered if he realized how funny his explanation sounded. I tried to control my laughter, but it bubbled up from deep inside and erupted into belly laughs that came all the way from my toes. "Well, that explains a lot," I said, nearly choking on my uncontrollable response.

Mac frowned at first, looking at me like I had gone insane. Then he got it, snickered, and laughed out loud. "He's had a facelift too. He tries to pass for twenty."

"And that's why he needs a young, slim wife?" Dave's behavior was so self-centered that I wondered how Mac could tolerate him. There had to be a reason stronger than Dave's personality, a

relationship baptized in history. “How long have you known Dave?” I asked.

“Since our family moved to Washington. He was my friend in high school.”

Unless Dave had changed over the years, he probably had few friends and was eager to accept the new kid, but that didn’t explain why Mac liked Dave. “Was Dave from a wealthy family?” I asked.

“No, not wealthy, but better off than some. His parents opened the speedway in north Portland. We raced cars when we were in our teens. We were quite a team, competed on the Northwest circuit, won trophies and all that. Like an old Navy buddy, you don’t forget a racing friend.”

Mac drove up to a light and forgot to use the clutch. The car bucked and stalled. He pushed the starter button and the motor responded.

“Dave and I smashed up a car a week, and his old man fixed it. That’s where Dave learned his trade.”

That bit of history explained a lot for me. “Is he a good body man?”

“One of the best. That’s why his business is growing. He’s probably worth millions now, and he started in a small shop behind his house.”

That was all very admirable, but the sooner Dave completed the job on Mac’s car, the happier I’d be. I felt a nagging concern that Mac’s friendship for Dave was stronger than his affection for me, that Dave’s attitudes about women would do me no good. At some point, I’d have to stand up for myself, and I couldn’t depend on Mac to understand.

Happy Birthday

Dave and Mac worked with the passion of a pit crew until the Lincoln was stripped to raw metal, and then it sat, and sat, and sat. Mac and I ate breakfast with Dave and Barbara each Saturday so the men could make plans for the day, but somewhere in the conversation, Dave remembered that he was out of the right shade of paint, that there was a drag race he wanted to see, that the heat had been turned off in the paint room, almost anything to prevent the men from working on the Mark IV. My time with Mac was limited. I resented giving up my Saturdays to Dave's whims, but my resentment didn't influence Mac. The lure of Dave's empty promises was too strong.

In early spring, my work took me to Portland in the middle of the week, and I had some extra time, so I called Mac. We agreed to meet at five at his place and go out to dinner. When I approached the house, Virginia met me in the drive.

"Mac's at the body shop," Virginia said. "Dave wanted help with something."

"Did he forget about our date?" I asked.

"No, he said you could meet him over there."

I bristled. "He did, did he? Tell your brother that if he wants to see me, I'll be at my apartment in Hood River."

Virginia clutched her hands to her chest and her mouth puckered into a gray prune. "He won't like for you to go like that," she said.

"I don't expect him to like it. He said he'd be here. He's not. I'm leaving."

I backed into the street and nearly sideswiped a parked car. I was furious, but I was frightened, too. Mac might let me stew in my own temper. I did want to be with him, but not at the body shop.

I hadn't been home long when he called. "Why did you run off?"

"I don't like being stood up."

"Didn't Virginia tell you to meet me at Dave's?"

"Yes, she told me, but I've had my fill of the scream of sanders and the smell of paint, and I can't stand Dave or Barbara."

"It wouldn't hurt you to be a little more flexible." Mac's words were crisp and sharp. "Dave's right; it's a good thing we never married."

That did it. I burned to my toenails. "I suppose Dave gives you advice about our love life, too. Does he tell you how to control the little woman, how to keep her in her place? Well I'm not Barbara, and if you don't know that by now, you've had your eyes closed for five years."

For a few seconds, neither of us spoke. I thought Mac had hung up, and I was about to put the phone in its cradle when I heard his voice again. This time his words were smooth and apologetic. "I know you're not like Barbara, and I wouldn't want you to be, but Dave's not charging me for painting the Lincoln, and I have to consider his time."

"That's nice," I said, "but that doesn't make him any more appealing to me. If I never saw the man again, it'd be too soon."

Mac cleared his throat. "We have been spending a lot of time at the shop. I'm sorry. Let me make it up to you. Your birthday is next Saturday. I promise I'll spend the entire weekend doing whatever you want to do."

That sounded good until I glanced at my calendar. I had job related commitments all weekend. "I'd like that," I said, "but I'll be attending a conference next Saturday, and I'll need to be in Hood River by nine Sunday morning. Saturday night is all the time I have."

"Then we'll make the most of it. What do you want for a present?"

"Just you."

"That's not much of a birthday present."

"Yes it is. Having you all to myself would be a terrific present."

"Okay. I'll get a bottle of Cabernet and a couple of steaks, and we'll stay home."

The workweek was excruciating. Mobs of colleagues, influential clients, and public officials met for long-range planning, a once-every-four-years Extension event. I went directly from the Saturday meeting to Mac's place, looking forward to a few private hours alone with my lover. I dreamed of relaxing in the comfort of his home, to forgetting the outside world and spending the limited time we had together in bed. When I drove up to twenty-one ten, I had visions of kicking off my shoes, changing into something comfortable, and burying myself in his arms.

Mac raced out of the house to meet me. "You're late."

"Late for what?"

"Just get in my car. I'll explain later." Mac practically pushed me into the front seat of the old Pontiac.

My low energy didn't prepare me for the next shock.

"Dave's taking us to Henry Ford's for your birthday."

I couldn't believe my ears. "Dave? But you promised. How could you?" Tears of disappointment welled in my eyes.

"It's a first class restaurant, Patricia. You'll enjoy it."

"I'm not likely to enjoy being with Dave and Barbara."

"Once you're there, you'll change your mind. You'll see."

I could see Mac's determination. I wasn't about to change his mind so I sat back against the misshapen seat and looked out the window, trying hard to keep the tears contained.

Mac patted my hand. "I've known Dave all my life, and he's trying to get along."

I glared at him.

I know this isn't what you wanted, but please, go along with it. We'll come home early. I promise. I bought a bottle of Cabernet, just for you."

The taps of our steps announced our entrance to Dave who consulted his watch when we approached the lobby. "You're late," Dave said.

"I was waiting for Patricia," Mac apologized.

I clenched my teeth.

The men patted each other on the back and all was forgiven between them. Barbara and I stared at each other from opposite sides of the lobby.

The maitre d' seated us in the middle of a noisy dining room filled with exuberant people in party dress. I was out of place in my business suit. Oversized mixed drinks arrived the moment we sat down, and they were replaced within seconds of the last swallow. Dave had Mac's complete attention, and Barbara, like a good wife, watched her husband adoringly. The clink of forks on ceramic plates added percussion to an opera of human voices. Long legged cocktail waitresses in short skirts danced between tables while holding trays of drinks on up-stretched arms. Smoke from the bar circulated overhead and fell, one microscopic ash at a time, into my hair. Waiters brought plates. Waiters removed plates. I felt like a stranger in a foreign land where I didn't know the language.

I wanted to order something light, but Dave wouldn't have it. He ordered the sixteen-ounce New York steak for everyone. My entrée lay bleeding on my plate for more than an hour. Eventually, a merciful waiter removed the carcass from the table. The men lingered over their meals, talking about past racing episodes. Barbara seemed to be completely absorbed in the saga, but I couldn't keep my eyes off the clock, watching the precious minutes disappear. I had a drive to Hood River ahead of me and I had barely said hello to Mac. This was not the birthday I had envisioned. When the hour hand rolled up to ten, I nudged Mac. "It's getting late," I said. "Let's go."

"They haven't brought the check yet."

"Well, ask them."

"Dave's buying. We need to wait for him."

I sat back, grinding my teeth. Again, my needs took second place to Dave's. The more we sat, the more I burned.

When the check finally came, and we stood to leave, Mac gushed with thank-yous and looked to me to shower Dave with expressions of gratitude. I couldn't do it. The words stuck in the back of my throat.

"Patricia's a little tired tonight, but she thanks you too," Mac said.

"That's a lie," I snapped.

Dave's mouth dropped open.

Mac's face went white.

Everyone stared at me, even Dave.

Mac rattled his keys, mumbling goodbyes. He grabbed my arm and yanked me in the direction of the exit.

I pulled free. "Don't jerk me around," I said. "I know the way."

Dave and Barbara watched, shaking their heads. Probably everyone in the restaurant watched, but I didn't care. I wouldn't allow Mac to treat me like a naughty child.

We marched in lockstep. About halfway across the parking lot, Mac sputtered, "What's bugging you?"

I clenched my teeth, lowered my head, and stomped onward.

"You were just plain rude back there. Dave took us to one of the best places in Portland, and you acted like you didn't appreciate it."

I whirled around and faced Mac. "I didn't, and I don't appreciate you for letting it happen. I told you what I wanted for my

birthday, and I emphasized that it didn't include Dave. You don't care what I want. You're more concerned with what he wants."

"Patricia, he did a nice thing for you."

"Hell! He doesn't care a whit about me. He did a nice thing for you, and I'm not angry with Dave. Don't you understand? I'm furious with you. You broke your promise." I took my car keys out of my purse. "I'm tired. Take me to my car so I can go home."

After thinking about the situation for a few days, I knew that Mac had tried to do something special for me, and if I had been more rested and if we had been alone, I would have enjoyed Henry Ford's Restaurant. It was my turn to show my humble side. When I called, I recited a rehearsed apology, but Mac was so excited that he didn't hear a word. He and Dave had put the final coat on the Mark, and Mac talked non-stop about his plans for driving the Lincoln out of the curing room and back onto the street.

"I want to see that," I said.

"Dave said it would take forty-eight hours for the paint to cure. It will be ready Saturday morning."

Driving the Mark out of the body shop would put an end to Mac's obsession with the scratch and to the Saturday breakfasts with Dave and Barbara. I could hardly wait for Mac to take possession of his car.

We left the old Pontiac between sections of a newly landscaped parking lot in front of Dave's business. A variety of trees gave the cement block structure an illusion of style.

Mac wore a look of anticipation as we entered the lobby, and we both had springs in our legs. Dave came out of the back room, watching himself in a wall of mirrors that made the lobby appear twice its size. He stopped and smoothed his hair, not looking at either of us. I didn't expect him to acknowledge my existence, but when he failed to greet Mac in his usual boisterous manner, I suspected a problem.

"I have bad news," Dave said, his eyes shifting to and away from Mac. "The paint rippled. Maybe we could buff it out, but I don't think so."

Mac's shoulders drooped. "But last night ..."

"The paint rippled? What would cause the paint to ripple?" I interrupted.

Dave ignored me.

Mac had walked into the lobby with bounce in his step, not a sign of a limp, but now his body slumped, and I saw pain in his face. "What do we do now?" he asked.

"Start over," Dave replied. "Back to striping, sanding, base coat, everything."

"Start over!" I protested. "You've spent weeks on his car already."

Dave turned his back to me and began explaining his plan to Mac.

Barbara came up behind me and whispered, "I've just made a fresh pot of coffee. Care for some?" Her honey-coated invitation was perfectly timed to reduce tension and get me away from the men and their problems. I would have resisted, but sharing a cup of coffee with Barbara was better than listening to the men talk about paint. Her fake

smile offended me, but I followed her and the scent of her overpowering perfume to her office. Mac didn't notice when I left; he was so engrossed in Dave's explanation.

Every piece of paper had its proper place on Barbara's desk. She cleared a section and poured coffee into a pair of cheap white mugs with the business logo,"Overnight Service," printed on the front side.

"Overnight for whom?" I asked.

Barbara's condescending smile preceded her congenial response. "I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"The logo on the cup says, 'Overnight Service.' Dave's had Mac's car for months and it isn't finished. That's not overnight service."

Barbara's eyes narrowed. The stage smile disappeared. "Dave's been spending every Saturday working on Mac's Lincoln, and he's not charging him. In addition, he's been picking up the tab for breakfast. What more do you want?"

"I want overnight service like the logo says. Your husband should charge Mac the going rate and get on with the project."

Barbara looked at me like I was crazy. "You don't know, do you?"

"I don't know what?"

"Mac has filed for bankruptcy. His insurance refused his hospital claim, and the bills have wiped him out. He's deeply in debt."

Barbara and I had no affection for each other, but why would she tell me a story like that? Of course the insurance paid. Mac was earning benefits for going to school, and he had money to buy gifts. His bar bill exceeded the grocery bills for most families. He had

money to entertain his friends, and we often stayed in first class hotels. That's not the behavior of a person filing for bankruptcy. Maybe Barbara thought she could discourage my affection for Mac with her story, but she had gone beyond convincing with her farfetched lie.

"Really?" I said, batting my eyelashes. "He doesn't act like a person who's broke."

Barbara smirked and sipped her coffee. "Don't believe me, if you wish, but you will. Wait and see."

Confusing Behavior

Something went wrong at twenty-one ten. Without warning, Mac rented a trailer space in North Portland and moved out of the house. He called to give me directions. "Why did you move?" I asked.

"It's Virginia. She's crazy."

"That's not exactly new information," I said. "What happened?"

She brought people to the house."

"What's wrong with that?" I felt like a prosecuting attorney cross examining the accused.

Mac sighed. "They're lowlife, people she found hanging around the church looking for a handout."

"It must be hard for Virginia to make friends. They probably made her feel important."

"Yeah, they were praising God just like she does. Sounded like a couple of echoes. She thinks she's going to save them. Twenty-one ten looks like a Salvation Army soup kitchen. I had to get out."

I had visions of Virginia's potential converts, ragged and smelly street people. Virginia seldom disagreed with Mac, but if he criticized her missionary zeal, she'd have stood up to him.

"She kicked me out," he said sheepishly. 'It's my house too,' she said, and she's right. We can't live together. It isn't working."

Mac sounded discouraged, and I wanted to cheer him up. "Would you like a visitor?"

"Sure, but not here. I'm not unpacked. Let's meet at the Red Lion.

When I entered the Red Lion's Quiet Bar, I saw him the first thing. Mac held a martini glass, suspended, just beyond his nose; his eyes fixed on the hotel pool below the window. I approached his table without making a sound so I wouldn't disturb his concentration.

He said hello without turning his head. I looked in the direction of his stare but all I saw were hotel patrons swimming in the bright blue water. A sailboat mast bobbed above the pool fence, and the Columbia River sparkled deep blue in the distance.

"If I were closer, I'd yell fire," Mac said.

Had I missed something? I looked again. The second time, I saw a teenaged girl sunning herself on a towel; her bikini top untied with the straps lying free. Mac's expression took me back to my childhood. I had seen my father look at women with lust in his eye just like Mac, and sometimes I think my father stared at pretty women just to get a reaction from my mother. React she did, loud and strong, but over the years I learned that she had no intention of doing anything more than react. She held my father in an open hand. My mother was secure in her ability to take care of herself, and I felt the same way. Mac could look all he wanted and it wouldn't change my life.

From the time we met, I knew that Mac was a womanizer. On many occasions, he had bragged about his escapades in explicit detail, and he had good reason to brag. In bed, he knew exactly what a

woman wanted, and he had the equipment to deliver. At fifty-eight, he was still strikingly attractive, and his deep sexy voice turned women's heads wherever we were. When I was with him, I felt privileged to be his companion. What he did when we were apart was his business. He never pried about my activities when I was away from him either.

"She's very attractive," I said.

Mac continued to stare with his back turned to me. "I saw a fire alarm outside the bar. I'll set fire to the tablecloth if you'll ring the bell. I want to see what she'd do." He turned and looked at me. Behind the straight face, I saw the teasing twinkle in Mac's eye.

"Mac!!!" I sat down, crossing my arms tight against my chest.

"Okay, don't help me then, but it'd be worth a week in the clink to see those knockers."

His teasing mood disappeared, and for the first time, he gave me his complete attention. "How was the meeting?" he asked.

"Great! I'm learning more than I ever wanted to know about alcoholism."

Mac raised his empty glass. "My favorite pastime." He turned poolside. "Next favorite pastime."

"She's very young, Mac."

"Yeah, it would be my luck to get arrested."

Mac didn't fool me. If he thought he'd have a chance with that girl, he'd pursue her to the edge of his cell. He was calculating his choices; Mac was sure I would be available. The girl in the bikini was a long shot.

"I like them young. I wouldn't be able to get it on with an old woman, or a fat woman."

I had celebrated my forty-eighth birthday and had gained twenty pounds. “Well, I guess I should expect an eviction notice from your bed any day.”

Mac didn’t blink. “Why? You haven’t changed. You look the same as you did the afternoon we met at the Village Green, maybe better.” His grin disappeared and he looked directly at me. “You’re not like other women, Patricia. You’ve never told me no. Do you know what that means to a man?” He looked back at the pool. “I know how she’d look at me.” He turned his back to the window, his face in the shadow. “I can tell you anything, can be completely honest, as ugly as that may be, and you accept it. You don’t throw tantrums, wheedle apologies, or demand gifts. The worst you do is walk away.” He nodded. “You are an independent one, and that does make me nervous, but you’ve got something that gets better with time, something comfortable.”

“Old shoes?”

He glanced at me. The thinking creases in his brow ran deep. “No, more like antique gold.”

He eyed the empty space on the table in front of me. “Let me buy you a drink.” Mac stood up and peeked over the wall one last time. He leaned on his cane and hobbled to the bar.

He returned with a glass of red wine for me and a martini with three olives for him. “I almost forgot the good news,” he said. “The Mark is finished.”

“I’ve heard that before,” I said. “You can’t blame me if I’m skeptical.”

“No, it’s done. I drove it out of the shop today.”

The excitement caught me by surprise. "Well, take me for a ride. I've been waiting for months." I felt like skipping.

Mac shook his head. "No, Patricia. She's sitting next to my trailer with a black nylon cover over her. Don't want to risk getting another scratch. Dave says, 'The Mark IV's a classic. Will be worth money some day. Keep it covered and in a few years, she'll pay you back.'"

I had heard a lot of nonsense attributed to Dave, but this one took the prize. Mac's whole self-image was reflected in his car, and now he was going to wrap it in black nylon. "You mean you're not going to drive it?"

"Nope."

"Are you're keeping the Pontiac?"

He reacted like someone had slapped him. "I hate that bucket of bolts! I'm looking to buy a pickup."

I looked at Mac and saw a stranger. After all the sanding and polishing, after driving a car he hated for months, after all that, he was going to abandon his prized Lincoln. It didn't make sense. A lot of things didn't make sense.

Up the Ladder

As the years went by, my responsibilities with the Oregon Extension Service increased. In 1984, my colleagues, the county home agents for the state of Oregon, elected me to speak for them at an agents' professional meeting in Reno. Oregon had bid to host the 1988 national convention, and they wanted me to present the promotional package to the regional board. California had bid against us, and Oregon's presentation at the regional meeting was critical. Harold, my supervisor, represented the agricultural agents, and together we were expected to come back to Oregon with the eighty-eight bid in our pocket.

I was petrified. I had attended only one national meeting, and I had learned that it was an organization laden with ritual and tradition. "There's so much to learn," I confided in Harold.

"You can do it," he said. "I'll be there with you, and I'll explain as we go. You'll be the naive fresh new face that gets attention. Our state group has prepared a set of visuals on the tourist attractions in Oregon. People want to come to a beautiful place, and we have a lot to offer. All we need to do is convince the board that Portland hotels can accommodate the group. That's where you come in. You know the area." He made light of my anxiety, but his assurance that I could do the job helped me relax.

I did my homework. By the time we arrived in Reno, I was ready to report on the availability of meeting rooms, audio-visual equipment, menus, and housing. I knew the names and phone numbers of contacts. Whatever the regional delegates might ask, I was prepared to answer.

All too soon, Harold and I were looking for a seat in the Hilton Convention Hall. "Let's go up front where we are closer to a floor mike." Harold led the way and I followed.

When working with ranchers in the county, Harold dressed in denim jeans and western boots. In Reno, he looked like a banker: suit, tie, and polished wingtip shoes. As we moved between tables to the front of the windowless room, Harold introduced me to people saying their names and a line or two about each person's job or family. I was impressed with the number of people he knew.

A handsome man with steel gray hair tapped Harold on the shoulder. The men exchanged greetings appropriate for old friends.

"Sorry to hear about your wife," Harold said. "Terrible accident!"

The man's mouth turned down and for a moment his eyes revealed his grief. "It's been difficult," he confided.

Harold turned to me. "Pat, I'd like you to meet Phil, horticultural specialist from California. His state's bidding against us."

Nothing more was said about Phil's wife, and I wondered what had happened to her. Phil repressed the grief-stricken expression and shook my hand with professional dignity. After a few moments of polite conversation, the three of us sat down at a round table near the front of the meeting room with me between the men. Phil opened his

leather-bound day-planner to a page outlining California's convention plan, one that might be more attractive to the board than ours.

He leaned in front of me to talk to Harold, and his aftershave left a clean subtle scent lingering in the air, not an overpowering smell like the grocery store brand Mac wore. The nearness of him excited me, and I felt a warm blush move up my neck and into my cheeks. Embarrassed by my reaction, I turned my attention to the raised platform where a speaker stepped up to the podium to open the ceremonies.

I found myself comparing Mac to the men sitting next to me, but I couldn't imagine Mac wearing a suit and tie or carrying a day planner. I had fallen in love with a laboring man; a man who had lavished me with the best money could buy when he could, but a man encumbered by an aging body and a going nowhere education.

Since his accident, Mac had shriveled like his empty money clip. I overlooked many irritations because I loved him. He seemed interested in the accounting course, but sometimes he let it slide. I understood that his reconstructed back caused him pain, and I attributed his inertia to physical discomfort, but I often disapproved of his coping methods. When medication wasn't enough, he treated himself with alcohol, and I worried about his liver.

Would Mac have handled his pain differently if he were one of the professionals in this room? Although I didn't know much about Phil, it seemed to me that he grieved the loss of his wife with dignity. Did he take pills or use alcohol to deal with his emotional suffering? For reasons that I can't explain, I doubted that he'd use those methods.

Harold and I quickly became a publicity team, shaking hands, distributing flyers, and lobbying the voting delegates. For the first time in my memory I appreciated name tags, a great help for those of us who have trouble remembering names. At the business meeting, I presented the prepared package we brought from Oregon. When the votes came in, we had the bid for the 1988 convention.

A few days after we arrived home, Harold called me into his office. "You did a great job at the regional meeting. I told you that you would, but that was just a beginning. When you apply for tenure, you'll need to document additional evidence of your leadership ability. Of course you know that you must have a master's degree and be on tenure track to stay employed after 1986?"

This reminder caught me by surprise. Although I had been told the conditions for ongoing employment, I hadn't realized how little time I had left. "To be honest, I haven't thought much about it," I admitted.

"Time you did. Would hate to lose you. Where do you plan to go to school?"

There was only one possible answer that would accommodate my relationship with Mac. "Oregon State," I said with a smile.

Harold shook his head. "Not a good idea. You'd have more credibility if you went to a university outside your home state."

The responsibility of getting an advanced degree sent waves of panic through me. Thoughts of moving to another state paralyzed me.

"Why should I leave Oregon?" I asked.

"Two reasons. First, you'd bring fresh ideas back rather than recycle what we already know. Second, you'd be able to get away from the job."

"I had planned to work while going to school"

Harold shook his head. "Take advantage of sabbatical funds. If you go to school out of state, you're eligible for half your present salary. If you stay here, you'll pay all your expenses and you'll be expected to serve your clientele as well. I've watched people try to do both, and it doesn't work."

"Why not?"

"Those who finished their degree offended the folks at home. The others are gone. I think you should make a clean break, consider your own needs, and come back refreshed."

After talking to Harold, I researched university programs that would make a difference to me when I returned to my job. There were few home economics schools left, but Michigan State had a strong program. Since my parents lived in Michigan, that was my first choice.

What would Mac say when I told him that I might leave Oregon?

We were lingering at the dining room table and Virginia had gone to her room when I broached the subject.

"Harold called me into his office yesterday," I began.

"Oh? Are you in trouble?" Mac folded the newspaper to the crossword puzzle and searched for a pencil.

"In a way. I'm running out of time to get a master's degree."

"Why do you need one?"

"It's university policy. A bachelor's degree is good for no more than seven years. I have to go back to school."

Mac didn't appear to be paying much attention. He rifled through unopened mail on the table until he found a pencil, picked up the newspaper, turned to the crossword puzzle, and filled in a line of squares. I was about to repeat my words when he spoke. "When are you leaving?"

"Next September. I was thinking about Michigan State."

"Why so far away?"

"They have a communications program that I could use. And I'd be able to spend some time with my parents."

Mac lit his pipe and leaned back, giving me his complete attention.

"Will you live with your parents?"

"No, they're too far from the campus. I'll rent an apartment."

"And move everything, your furniture and all?"

His inquiry threw me. If a casual acquaintance had asked the same questions, I would have taken it as an attempt at small talk, but Mac and I had been together for six years. "Maybe some of it," I said. "Chances are I'll store most things or have a garage sale. Why?"

"Furniture is like family. You don't just store them away for a year."

"Of course I can. I just need to find a warm dry place, and my things will be fine." Although we talked about furniture, something else prompted Mac's question. What was he thinking?

Mac shrugged and turned his attention to the newspaper. I couldn't leave it there.

I sucked in breath while building courage to ask the crucial question, "If I go to Michigan, will you go with me?"

He reached for the dictionary without looking at me, found the spelling he needed, and filled in another word, but he didn't answer my question.

After we went to bed, and after we had made love, I approached the subject again. "I'd like you to go with me," I stated my request clearly and waited for a reaction.

Mac snuggled up next to me. "What would I do in Michigan?" he asked kindly.

"Oh, I don't know. Get a job. Go fishing. Watch the coeds on campus." I was searching for an activity that would appeal to him.

"September's a long way off." Mac turned on his back. "You're forgetting that I haven't finished rehab."

"You'll be through before September, won't you?"

"I might be."

I searched for help in the crack of light coming from under the door.

Mac held my hand. "I need to keep an eye on twenty-one ten. Virginia can't handle it alone. Why do you have to go so far away anyway?"

"Michigan State has the best program for the work I do. I could go to Oregon State, but Harold advised me not to."

Mac squeezed my hand. "I know you'd stay if you could. Do what's best for your career, and that sounds like going to Michigan." He rolled over to his side. "We go where our work takes us when we're lucky enough to have work." Mac got quiet, and I thought he

had gone to sleep. From inside the dark room he whispered, “Things will change once you’re gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“A year’s a long time, and both of us enjoy our sex life. It won’t be long before one or both of us has a new lover.”

I had to admit that a year without him would strain my self-discipline, but I would be busy. I wouldn’t have time for men. “I don’t think I’ll have a problem,” I said.

Mac chuckled. “Well, I won’t make promises I can’t keep.”

Mac had never been one to give up sexual gratification, and whether or not he said so, I expected him to wander while I was gone. “Do you have someone in mind?” I asked.

“No, but Dave would like to hook me up with his sister.”

“I didn’t know Dave had a sister.”

“Yeah, she’s divorced. Dave gave her a job in the office. He thinks somebody who hangs out there will take her out, but none of the guys like her. She talks too much.”

“Like her brother?”

“Yeah, nobody at the shop has a chance to get a word in edgewise when Dave’s around, but that makes it easier for me. I don’t have to dream up things to say.”

“Perhaps Dave’s sister will become more attractive when I’m gone.”

Mac yawned. “Not likely!” He reached out and took my hand. “I don’t understand why you need to leave at all. Why don’t you just get a different job and stay here?”

“Because I love what I do. I’d be crazy to quit.”

"Well then, I guess we could give each other space and start over when you get back. Now let's go to sleep."

I remembered Mac's story about construction workers on the road. "Nearly all my men will have girlfriends before the year has ended," he told me shortly after we started seeing each other. "And their wives don't object if the men send enough money home."

Being apart wasn't new to him, but it was new to me. The next morning I asked again. "I'd like you to go with me to Michigan," I pleaded.

Mac's eyes met mine. For several seconds, the ticking of a clock filled in where words were missing. Mac looked at the back of his hands. "So much can happen in a few months. Why do we have to decide now?"

"Because my plan must be filed with OSU by June. Classes start in September."

Mac completed the last word in a crossword puzzle and downed his morning coffee. Then he got up and took the trash to the curb. The decision had been made. I would be going to Michigan alone.

Last Hope

My warm, inviting apartment turned hostile. I had stuff: stuff to pack, stuff to store, stuff to sell. How did I accumulate so much in six years? The things I put in boxes were tokens of achievements, bits of history, and treasured keepsakes. Many were gifts from Mac. The holes left on the walls, shelves, drawers and tabletops reflected how I felt – transitional and incomplete.

Without Mac, I would be on my own which wasn't entirely new, but the idea of not having him close emphasized how much I had come to depend on him for companionship. I had one ray of hope left, his accounting course. Once he finished, he'd be able to work anywhere including Michigan, and that would give him reason to join me, but my rationalization did little to ease the growing knot in my gut.

June arrived and Mac received his diploma. Tensions between he and Virginia had eased. The street people found a better place to fill their bellies and left. With the overriding calm, Mac and I spent many of our weekends working in the yard at twenty-one ten. "She won't do it," he said, "and I can't just let it go. If the neighbors don't like the way we keep the yard, they'll come to me, not her."

To celebrate his graduation, I stopped at a nursery and bought a lace leaf maple, a small tree with blood-red deep-cut leaves that looked like lace. We had often drooled over the miniature trees, but

we hesitated to buy. Mac had little money for discretionary spending, and he didn't want me to use my funds on plants for twenty-one ten. "You need to spend your money on yourself," he said. "Virginia and I are responsible for this place."

The front corner of the yard needed an accent plant, and Mac's graduation gave me the opportunity to give him something I knew he'd like. The delicate maple was perfect.

I found what I wanted at our favorite nursery and put the tree in the back of my Datsun. When I arrived, Mac was mowing the front lawn. He stopped the mower and approached my car, his eye on the back seat. "Did you know a tree's growing in the back of your car?" he asked. His teasing eyes reminded me of old times.

"It's for you, for finishing school," I said.

"Nice surprise!" He grinned.

"To celebrate the beginning of your new career."

Mac opened his mouth, but stopped without a word.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"No, it's nothing. Let me help you." Mac took the potted plant out of the car. Virginia watched from the porch, shifting from one foot to the other, her hands clasped in front of her. "It's pretty," she said. "What is it?"

"It's a special kind of maple tree, a present for Mac," I said. "His graduation present."

Virginia and Mac looked at me like I had spoken in a foreign tongue. "Is she talking about that paper on the table?" Virginia asked.

"Yeah, they call it a diploma," he replied, sarcastically.

Their reactions puzzled me. I concluded that doing well in school didn't mean as much to them as it did to me. Regardless, I had the tree, and I wanted them to know that I thought Mac had done something special.

"Where should we plant it?" he asked.

"How about that corner?" I pointed to a spot across the lawn.

Mac agreed, and he muscled the tree to its designated spot.

"I'll get a shovel," I said. Like a faithful puppy, Virginia followed me to the garage. I opened the door and stopped. The light was off and the darkness inside reminded me of that frightening night when Ronnie accosted me.

"I'll get it," Virginia said. She gave my arm a gentle squeeze. "Ronnie's getting married in September. Did Mac tell you?"

I shook my head.

"I don't suppose you'll be attending the wedding."

Virginia must have known that I wanted no part of Ronnie's celebration. "I'll be living in Michigan by then."

Virginia stopped and looked at me, her mouth puckered and her eyes half closed. "Does Mac know?"

"Yes, we talked about it."

"That's not good. He'll get really grouchy now."

I saw the tears forming in her eyes. I didn't expect Virginia to react like that. "I'll be back in a year," I said, attempting to soften the effect of my announcement. "I'm surprised he didn't tell you."

"He don't talk to me about things that bother him."

I had a notion to tell her that he didn't confide in her because she had a habit of turning his problem into sermons. I didn't though. My calloused comments would only hurt her more.

With shovel, rake, and pruning tools in tow, we returned to the front yard and watched Mac place the tree, step back and look, move the tree, and do it all over again. When all three of us had agreed on the best perspective, Mac dug a hole, took the tree out of its pot, and lowered it into the hole. Once he had it where it showed it's best side to the house, he filled in the soil around it.

"Someone will need to keep it watered until it gets established," I said. "Virginia. Can you do that?"

"If I remember."

"I'll help you remember," Mac said.

The three of us stood back, assessing the project. For me, the tree represented Mac's future career. For Mac, it symbolized the end of an income producing exercise in futility. "I'm tired of school," he said. "I'm glad it's over."

To Virginia, the little tree was a social challenge. She shaded her eyes and rocked forward and back from toes to heels. "Jesus loves it too. I'll be nice to it."

When we finished working in the yard, Mac and I went to his trailer. He carried my overnight bag inside. We sat down at the table. Mac lit his pipe. He turned the TV to the evening news, and then he opened a book of crossword puzzles. I watched TV. When a commercial break interrupted the program, Mac muted the set, and I took the opportunity to talk about my plans to move.

"I've been thinking," I said. "With that new diploma in your pocket, you could get work in Michigan. Part time, maybe, but you could get hired as an extra during tax season. I'd really like your company. There are so many things I can't do alone."

"You'll find a way," he said. He continued filling in the blanks of his puzzle.

"You could get work during tax season for sure," I said.

"You're creating an illusion, but it won't work. Paper or no paper, nobody's going to hire someone in their late fifties who has no experience."

"I disagree. You're well qualified, and during the tax season, accountants need extra help. It'd be a way to find out if you liked it." I exhaled a long deep breath. I almost begged, "Don't you see? We'd be together."

Mac slapped the puzzle book against the table. "Patricia, stop! I'm not going with you. His eyes looked like stone. "Do taxes for rich people? I don't think so."

"Well then, what are you going to do? The state will stop paying you now that you're through school, and you can't do construction work."

Mac turned away from me. The silence between us sucked the oxygen out of the air, and I felt dizzy. He picked up his pencil and completed another word, his pipe smoldering in the ashtray. I sat rigid, waiting for him to tell me what he had on his mind. "Mac, you're not thinking about construction work, are you?"

He said nothing, but I could tell by the way he turned away from me that I had spoken the truth. Construction work was exactly what he planned to do.

"That's crazy!" I said.

Mac looked me in the eye. His words were icy cold. "You'll be twenty-five hundred miles away, Patricia. What do you care?"

My insides cramped. Did Mac think I was abandoning him?"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I have things to do here." He took his pipe out of the ashtray and turned it around in the palm of his hand. "Right now, I need a settlement from Oregon. That's what I'll be doing while you're gone. Harry said he'd help me." He took a draw on his pipe. "He tells me that there's work in Arizona."

"You can't be serious. With your back like it is, they won't hire you. You're too likely to get hurt."

Mac's eyes narrowed. "I won't tell them. "I'm not some goddamned pencil pusher, Patricia. I'm a skilled electrical worker. If there's work in Arizona, I'm going to take it."

"You had no intention of ever working as an accountant, did you?"

"No, I was biding my time."

I felt the sting of anger burn my cheeks. "What will you do if you get hurt again?"

"I won't get hurt again, and if I do, so what? That's the luck of the Irish."

I saw visions of more hospital bills and desperate days with bill collectors at the door. His decision to return to construction work defied reason.

I looked at my overnight bag sitting unopened on the floor. Why did I keep trying? Mac was telling me that our relationship didn't matter to him. He had plans that didn't include me.

I picked up my bag. "I've had enough of this. Why wait until September? I'm ready to make the break now." I opened the trailer door and stepped outside.

"I'll call you."

"No, don't. Not this time. I don't plan to be alone for long."

I returned to my apartment where the empty shelves and half full boxes reminded me of the change taking place in my life.

Mac didn't call, and neither did I.

Part III: Resolution

September 1986 to March 2005

Starting Over

For the next two years, men blew in and out of my life like winter storms, did their damage, and vanished. Some lavished me with glittering baubles, but most scattered tattered trappings of what might have been, robbed the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and breezed into somebody else's life. I spent a year in Michigan in pursuit of an advanced degree, and returned to Oregon in 1985 with enough experience to write a thesis on the pros and cons of developing relationships with divorced or widowed men.

My next assignment with Cooperative Extension took me to Dallas, Oregon, in the heart of the Willamette Valley. With the campus less than thirty miles away, I had arrived at the place I most wanted to be geographically and professionally. My fiftieth birthday had come and gone, and it was time to advance in my career.

The personal side of my life was less complete. I had grown tired of apartment living, and I longed for a house equipped with or without a husband. If I could find a nice man with a little money and home maintenance skills, I'd be interested in sharing floor space and a yard.

I had been in Dallas for less than a year when I met Bill, a bear of a man with an easygoing personality. We both knew that our relationship lacked chemistry, but we shared a mutual desire for home ownership, and that motivated us to think about a future together.

Bill knew people and places in Marion and Polk counties. He introduced me to valuable contacts and showed me the out-of-the way sights only the natives knew. Bill would be an asset to my career, so with loveless determination, we contemplated marriage.

The closer I came to committing to a life with Bill, the more I thought about Mac. Passion would never be a part of the new arrangement, and I convinced myself that I no longer needed it; but memories of tender moments haunted me, taunted me, and drove me to find Mac, learn what he was doing, and ask him if he might consider getting back together. One day, following a business meeting in Portland, I drove across the Interstate Bridge to twenty-one ten. If Virginia still lived there, she could give me the information I wanted.

When I walked up the sidewalk, I noticed the shrubs Mac and I had transplanted. They were doing well, including the lace leaf maple I had given him to celebrate his graduation. The bright pink blooms on a row of azaleas dotted the edge of the property, a signature brushstroke of Mac's handiwork.

I knocked several times and waited. I felt the morning sun on my shoulder and smelled the yeasty memory of morning rain, but nobody answered my insistent knock. Before turning to leave, I took a mental picture of the house, wondering what had changed in the lives of its occupants.

I stepped down the three concrete steps and turned to take one last long look. A curtain moved in the front window. I expected to see a face, but the window was still. I looked again, adjusted my glasses and stared at the black shadow behind the glass. Did the curtain actually move, or was my imagination playing tricks on me?

I heard a sound behind me. I turned. The door stood open with Virginia bending around the frame to get a good look at me.

Patricia!" she shouted, "I thought you were a bill collector." Virginia shifted her weight from one foot to the other while clinching and releasing her fists. A broad grin filled her round face. "Mac told me not to answer the door unless I knew who it was. I never dreamed it would be you. Praise God, but you are a welcome sight!"

She stepped back for me to enter, and when I passed close to her, she whispered in my ear. "He'll be glad to see you."

My heart beat faster. Mac was somewhere in that house.

"I'll wake him," Virginia said, and disappeared down the hall.

I stood in the living room where I had waited the first day I entered that house. It was still a humble dwelling, but I could breathe without retching.

I heard Mac's footsteps first and then his words, "Hello sweetheart." My nerve endings vibrated. I could only stutter an awkward "Hi," in response. Mac had the same effect on me as he had the first time I saw him at the Village Green in 1979. Bill's appeal fizzled in comparison. I wanted to resume a relationship with Mac. I wanted it desperately.

Compelling forces drew us together. Desire smoldered just below the surface. "I've missed you," he said in my ear.

"I've missed you too." I could barely breathe. My heart raced, and I wanted the excitement of his touch to go on forever.

Mac squeezed me one more time and stepped back. "What brings you to twenty-one ten?"

I caught my breath, swallowed hard, and regained some semblance of control.

"I was in the area," I said, "I stopped to ask Virginia for your address." I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to mask my nervousness. "Finding you here was a stroke of luck." My awkward act must have been amusing.

Mac grinned. "Let's go outside," he said. "I want to show you the result of the work we did in the yard." He led the way out of the kitchen, down the porch steps, and into the yard.

"The lace leaf maple is doing well in that spot," Mac said, pointing to a shady corner near the street.

"So I see." A flood of memories came back – planning the landscape, purchasing plants, and Mac's surprise when I gave him that tree. "I love that little tree."

Mac nodded. "Me too."

Like a child showing his prized toys to a best friend, Mac took my arm and guided me around the property, giving me a progress report of every plant in the yard.

We walked to the back of the property where an apple tree hung heavy with ripening fruit.

"I was surprised to find you here," I said. "I thought you and Virginia couldn't get along."

"We can't." He nodded toward the house. "But I don't dare leave her alone anymore. She doesn't eat, bathe, or sleep. In no time, she starts doing weird things." Mac reached up and picked an apple. "While I was living in the trailer, she was selling our mother's antiques in the street. It didn't look right to the neighbors, so they called the authorities and the police found me."

Mac shook his head in disgust. "Shit! She's a pushover for every salesman who walks by. Signed a contract with a construction

company to replace the siding." Mac gestured toward the house. "That stuff's like new and Virginia can't pay for it. I don't know what she was thinking."

"Maybe the voices told her to do it."

"Yeah, maybe. I know it's not her fault." Mac took a package of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and lit one. He held it at arm's length.

I stepped back from a stream of smoke, relentless in its efforts to circle my head. From a slightly distanced position, I reassessed the man. He wasn't the same person without his pipe. His hair and skin had grayed and he was thinner than I remembered.

"When I found out how sick she was," he continued, "I moved back into the house."

"She looks fine today."

"Yeah, I know. That's because I tell her what to do. She's obedient, will do whatever I say." Mac rolled his eyes. "I have to watch myself or I'd be asking her to wait on me hand and foot. It'd be easy to take advantage of someone like her."

We strolled arm in arm as we had so many times in the six years we had been together. "Did you know..." Mac began. He hesitated. "Of course you didn't know. Ronnie married a nice Christian girl from Seattle. Virginia's convinced that religion will change him. I'm not so sure."

We stopped under a trio of Douglas fir near the garage and chatted about Virginia, the house, the yard, the family; about everything except the one topic I wanted most to discuss. The way Mac held me, touched me, and looked at me; his eagerness to share, to confide; all these things told me he was ready to resume a

relationship, but he hadn't said so. To make sure that we understood each other, I sucked in my breath, stood tall, and asked, "Mac, would you like to start over?"

At first, he didn't answer. He paced back and forth in the shade of the evergreen giants, his head down, his eyes staring at the ground. After a hundred of Mac's steps and as many catches in my throat, he responded. "Patricia, two years ago, when you left me, my world ended. I didn't know where to go. While we were together, I hadn't been with anyone else, and I didn't know how to get back in circulation. What's more, I didn't want to. I just sat in my trailer and drank with the Colt Commander a cabinet door away. I hid between those four walls for months. I had to force myself to get dressed and go out."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Why didn't you call me?"

He shot a look that cut. "Because you said you wouldn't be alone."

Mac would not compete. I couldn't blame him for that.

"And now?" I asked. "Are you ready to start over now?"

Mac shook his head. "No, Patricia. It would be too hard."

The bottom dropped out of my stomach. I had gambled and lost, but I didn't cry. The last two years had taught me to hold the pain inside. "Perhaps that's best," I said, choking back my real feelings.

I said goodbye to Virginia and left as quickly as I could without being rude. Once in my car and out of sight, tears ran down my cheeks until there were no more. Mac had made himself clear. He didn't want to be hurt again, and I could give him no assurance that it wouldn't happen. We were both strong people with strong values, but our values were different. I couldn't promise Mac that I'd accept him

without question and it was likely we'd clash over something else, sometime. I had no choice but to go on without him. At least I knew where I stood.

When February came around, Mac's birthday, I dropped a card in the mail with my telephone number and mailing address clearly printed inside. If I had misunderstood his intent, he could get in touch with me. He didn't.

Bill and I married in January, 1987, a year after I visited Mac. Shortly after the wedding, I received a huge Valentine from Mac. The verse said:

Thank you
For yesterday
For bringing happiness
Right from the start,
For today
For being so thoughtful
And for all our tomorrows
Whatever they'll be,
Happy Valentine's Day

In Mac's meticulous hand, he wrote: I would like to see you again. Please feel free to work in my yard anytime. Please!

Mac.

The next letter I wrote to Mac was the most difficult of my life. I had been married just a month when I received his pleading

card. When Mac told me he didn't want to try again, I believed him. It was difficult to put my feelings aside and get on with my life, but I did. I sent a wedding announcement along with the following note:

> Dear Mac,
>
> Your beautiful Valentine brought a tear to my eye. Why did you wait so long before writing? I'm married now, and it's not likely that I'll be working in your yard any time soon. Sorry!
>
> As always,
>
> Patricia

Within the week, I received a card of congratulations from Mac. I didn't hear from him again until my birthday the following year. This time the caption on the card read: *With warm thoughts and memories for someone very special*.

Inside the card, Mac had enclosed a short letter.

> Well, I'm back working in Phoenix. Harry helped me get the job. His wife died and he needs a drinking buddy. I can do that. Can't do much else. Shit! Sure wish I'd saved my money. Hot weather, hard work, but it does feel good to have a check coming in every week. Just hope it lasts, at least as long as my back does.
>
> Mac

Mac sent me a birthday card, a Valentine, and a Christmas card every year without fail for the next three years. Each time the card

was selected for a special friend with whom the sender had shared fond memories. Mac didn't write any more notes or letters, but the cards appeared on schedule. I looked forward to each greeting, but between those three annual events, a new life with new people demanded my time and attention.

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Last Request

Things had not gone well at home. House or no house, Bill and I were ill-suited for each other and no amount of floor space would fix that. Bill had a number of health problems, and I stayed with him because he needed a nurse. By 1990, we were sleeping in different rooms and had begun the painful process of ending the marriage. In the meantime, I submerged myself in work.

One wild day in the fall when rain chased everyone inside, I drove through a cloud of wet leaves that blew around the parking lot and landed in the corner, my designated parking space. The thought of facing the weather and a mound of soggy leaves made me ponder the importance of actually showing up for that last hour of work. I had been in meetings all day, and I was exhausted. Just going home tempted me, but people were putting up the last of the season's tomatoes, and I expected a number of critical food safety questions waiting for immediate answers, so I dragged myself up the steps to the office.

I felt Pam's energy the second I stepped across the threshold. Her black bobbed hair and dark eyes almost snapped with urgency. "A gentleman called you twice this afternoon." She cocked her head and raised one eyebrow. "Wouldn't give a name or number. Said he'd call back."

"That's curious. Neither first nor last name?"

"No, but he knew you. Called you Patricia, not Pat."

I could list on one hand the people who called me Patricia. "Did you notice anything else?"

"His deep voice."

It had to be Mac.

The phone rang. "Good afternoon, OSU Polk County Extension." She covered the receiver and mouthed, "It's him."

"I'll take it at my desk."

As I passed through the doorway, I glanced over my shoulder and watched the expression on her face. Like every other woman in his life, she was caught up in his charm, and the unflappable look she usually wore had softened. She looked quite vulnerable.

I picked up.

"Hello, sweetheart," Mac said. "Decided to call and say hello."

"I thought the mystery man might be you. Are you calling from Phoenix?"

"No, I'm in Vancouver. I came to Washington on business." He paused. "The lace leaf maple died."

I wouldn't have felt worse if he had told me that a friend died, but I sensed a deeper concern, something Mac needed to share. "Would you like to talk about it?"

"I'd like that very much. Could you meet me for lunch tomorrow?"

We met at a Newport Bay restaurant near Oregon City. When I arrived, parking was scarce. I left my car in a lower lot, covered my head to keep my hair dry, and climbed the rain soaked steps to the entrance level.

At the top, I looked up just in time to see Mac ease his body out of a new Ford pickup parked in the handicapped zone. He must have come into some money.

I was not prepared for what I saw next. Although trim and neat, he had no bounce, his skin lacked the rugged tones of a man who worked outside, and the contortions of his mouth telegraphed pain associated with his bent and twisted steps.

I ran the remaining distance and gave him a hug. "Hello stranger," I said.

"You're looking prosperous. He stepped back to give me a visual assessment. "I like that coat."

"Thanks. It's something special I bought for myself." I wanted to tell him how great he looked too, but I couldn't lie.

He took my arm and we went inside. "How are the children?" he asked.

"Both are well. Lea Ann's a nurse, married, no grandchildren yet. Darrell finished college, an electronic engineer now, works in Salem. How's your family?"

"Donna's boys graduated from high school. The older one is in the Navy and the younger one's in college. They're smart boys. That little girl, about twelve, she's a sweetheart." Mac gleamed with grandfatherly pride.

"Did Donna remarry?"

"Nope, she supports those three kids by herself. Helps her mother financially too. Has a good job at the Hanford nuclear plant. Some say she'll get cancer. Bunch of wimps," he sneered.

We removed raingear and hung it at the entrance coat rack. The hostess took us to a booth in back where a mounted sailfish

dominated one wall. Rough-hewn floorboards, fishnet dividers between booths, and white lifesaving doughnuts on the wall did much to give the place a seafaring atmosphere. We sat on hard benches, not especially comfortable, but in keeping with the nautical theme.

Once seated and the menus in our hands, my thoughts went to Mac's new truck. When he was out of work, he lived close to the belt, but I never did believe his situation was as bad as Barbara had described. She was trying to frighten me. I wanted to ask Mac if he had seen Dave, but I didn't. Of course, he had. He shifted his weight like someone having trouble finding a comfortable way to sit.

"I see you're driving a new Ford," I said.

"Yeah, bought it for the trip."

"You parked in the handicapped space. What happened?"

Mac cleared his throat. "You warned me, Patricia. You told me construction work would do me in. We use motorbikes at the worksite in places too rugged to drive pickups. I was carrying a load of small tools to the guys up the line, swerved to avoid a rock, lost control, and hit a tree." He chuckled. "The tree's in bad shape."

I couldn't resist a smile. "I don't care about the tree, silly. What happened to you?"

"The previous surgery gave way. This time they can't fix it. I'll have to live with it."

I reached for his hand and held it tight. "I'm so sorry!" I resisted the urge to say, I told you so.

Mac grinned. "The drugs are better this time."

I saw the tease in the wrinkles around his eyes and I thought of the Village Green. He was a specimen of masculinity when we met.

His hair was darker and the wrinkles had not yet deepened, but the teasing little webs at the corner of his eyes were the same.

"That's nice," I said. "And I suppose you're taking them as prescribed."

"Patricia, I detect cynicism in your voice. Of course, I'm taking them as prescribed. Had Xerox copies made and filled each one three times, and I follow the directions exactly."

I rose to the bait. "You're not serious?"

"Only partially."

A waitress came to our table to take our order. She was a pleasant woman with cleavage even I could admire. Mac made no pretense of looking elsewhere. She must have been used to it because his ogling didn't faze her. She took our order and left.

Did you sell the Mark?" I asked.

"Oh no, I wouldn't do that. The Mark will be worth money some day. It's in Phoenix now."

"You think it's valuable?"

"It's a classic. Can't go wrong."

I didn't want to argue with Mac because he knew more about cars than I did, but it seemed to me that an antique car should be inside a building on a pedestal and worshiped on a daily basis. Those I knew who drove old cars in parades adjusted their lives around the precious relics. They didn't leave them in the weather, covered or not.

"Someday the right person will make me an offer I can't refuse. I'll sell it then." Mac rolled up a chambray sleeve and changed the subject. "How's your husband?" he asked.

His question caught me off guard. "He's well," thank you. "At least he's well today."

"That's not always the case?"

"No, he's been in and out of the hospital several times since we were married. I hadn't planned to be a nurse, but that's what I am."

"Do I detect a hint of resentment?"

"I guess so," I confessed, "but he's better now. Went fishing with his son today." I didn't want to talk about my marriage. My desire for a house had led me into an impossible arrangement with a man I didn't love. The man I once loved had turned me down years before, and now he grinned at me from across the table.

He looked me in the eye. "I could forget you have a husband if you could."

It wouldn't have taken much for me to stray, and Mac knew it. We were looking at each other like hormonally charged teenagers, and I was melting inside when the waitress put the beverages on the table. Mac's attention went from me to her cleavage and my self-esteem shriveled. The spell was broken.

We sipped hot coffee. Mac wheezed and cleared his throat, and then he coughed. The coughing went on and on.

"Are you all right?" I asked?

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and covered his mouth. The cough persisted. "I'm sorry," he said. "Doc says the cigarettes are killing me."

"And you're still smoking?"

Mac's hand went reflexively to his shirt pocket. "Just for you, I'll quit the vile little crutches tomorrow. I agree with Mark Twain. Quitting is easy. I've done it hundreds of times."

I knew I had no influence over Mac's smoking or drinking habits, and I had stopped nagging years earlier, but I still hoped a miracle would free him.

We chatted on about this and that, and in no time, the waitress brought our food. I had taken several bites before Mac picked up a fork. "I'm glad you're here," he said. "It's funny, I don't mind drinking alone but I hate eating alone. You're right. I am an alcoholic. I live on cigarettes, booze, and crossword puzzles." Mac stopped talking when the waitress passed the table going the other way. When she disappeared behind a divider, he continued telling his story. "I'd like to have sex once in a while, but I'm afraid of one-night-stands, and I don't want anything permanent. The last time I was with a woman, I thought she'd given me AIDS. Even saw a doctor. Isn't that crazy?"

"Today, that's a legitimate concern; one of the reasons I got married." I looked around at the crowd in the restaurant. I had presented workshops in Oregon City, and former participants might be watching. My thoughts went back to Brookings when Beverly caught me with Mac at the Cove. I didn't know what to do then, but I would now. I'd just introduce Mac as a friend. I felt completely comfortable holding his hand for the world to see; so different from the Nervous Nellie I had been in 1979.

"Tell me; what happened to the lace leaf maple?"

Mac shook his head. "When I drove up to the house, I looked for the little tree. All I could see was a stump sticking out of the ground. I was mad at Virginia for letting things go, but she couldn't take care of the yard. Shit, she couldn't take care of herself.

"I went to work in Arizona in 1988, and I knew she'd neglect the place, but I had no choice. There was no work near Vancouver. She was fine then." Mac squeezed my hand harder. "Ronnie moved in with her about a year ago. Stole everything of value from the house. Talked Virginia into giving him her monthly support check, and then he disappeared. People from her church got suspicious when she didn't show up for services. They investigated and found her in a catatonic state, abandoned, and starving. Thanks to them, Virginia's alive, in a hospital for nutcases, but doing well considering what she's been through."

Seeing images in my mind's eye of Virginia suffering made me sick to my stomach. The sandwich on my plate stared back at me, and I pushed it aside. A bitter taste filled my throat.

It wasn't Mac's fault that his sister had a breakdown. She trusted Ronnie and he took advantage of her. Hate doesn't often burden me, but I hoped Ronnie would get punished severely for his cruelty. "I thought your son got religion and married some nice girl who straightened him out."

Mac grunted. "Yeah, that lasted long enough to make a couple of kids. His wife couldn't change him so she dumped him. Can't blame her but he hit the next soft spot, his aunt. Since the state's paying for Virginia's care, there are all kinds of legal entanglements involving the house. That's why I came to Vancouver. Ronnie thinks he has squatter's rights. He doesn't know that the state of Washington is in line before him, and they want income from that house. I have to move what's left inside and sign some papers so they can rent it out." Mac chuckled. "They can't sell twenty-one ten until Virginia and I are both dead. Our mother made sure of that."

The waitress cleared the table and left the check, Mac pulled a hundred from his silver money clip and placed it in a conspicuous spot on the table. It had been years since I'd seen that lure. The waitress looked twice, predictably impressed. Mac sat tall, shoulders back, chin high. He had the appearance of someone with all kinds of confidence. I knew better, but the waitress didn't. Mac put his money clip in his pocket, cleared his throat, and leaned back. "I had a reason for asking to see you," he began.

"I thought you had, and it wasn't about a dead tree, was it?"

"No." Mac looked toward a wall of windows where the rain made rivulets down the glass. "Can you give me the afternoon?"

"I need to be back in Salem by six, but I can make it if we leave by five. Why?"

"Do you remember Clyde and Clara, Jeanette's parents?"

"Yes, I met them in Gold Beach. Clyde was the man who told you that Jeanette had remarried."

"That's him. I need to visit Clara, and I'd like you to go with me."

"Why me?"

There was heaviness in Mac's voice. "She's dying, and seeing her will be easier with you at my side."

I had met Clara only once, and I barely remembered her. "They don't know me. Won't I be an intrusion?"

Mac shook his head. "They know you. You made an impression on them, brief as it was, and I have talked about you enough that Clara asks how you are whenever I see her."

I remembered the picture of Jeanette that Mac smashed against the monkey tree. I had been jealous of that picture. It took up space on

Mac's wall and in his heart; space that I wanted for myself. I had never met Jeanette, but I would have recognized her if I had seen her on the street. My memory of her parents wasn't as clear.

"They're great people," Mac said. "Even after Jeanette divorced me, they invited me to family get-togethers, and I usually went unless they were expecting their daughter." Mac chuckled. "She's fat. Cute little curvy Jeanette weighs close to three hundred pounds." Mac leaned back, took a smug puff on his cigarette and blew smoke over his head. "She's a pig."

Considering my thoughts when I saw Mac get out of his pickup, I wondered what Jeanette thought of him.

From the way that Mac enunciated "She's a pig," I knew that his ex-wife would always remind him of a flaw in his Lincoln, a flaw in his life, a flaw in him.

"Okay, I'll go with you, but let me drive," I said. "Give your back a rest." It surprised me when Mac agreed.

Clyde and Clara lived in a well-established woodsy suburb in West Linn. Overgrown shrubs and trees, the mark of a dwelling for the elderly, nearly concealed the simple frame house. An aggressive rosebush reached for the roof, it's withered summer blooms hanging desperately to the entangled canes.

Mac knocked and then opened the door. "They never lock up," he said. "Hello in there."

"Back here, Mac," came a man's voice from the rear of the house. We stepped into a living room busy with lace: lace curtains, lace doilies, lace tabletops, and lace lampshades. "Does Clara crochet?" I asked.

"She does," Mac said. "Loves crafts. See the ceramic figures on the mantel? She made those."

"They're nice." An abundance of knickknacks made the small living room shrink. I had the feeling of being in a museum, a roped off place where visitors look and then move on. We walked down a hall covered with family pictures and more ceramics. We passed the kitchen and dining room, arriving at a place that appeared to have been a garage at one time. A muted TV on the wall opposite the entrance announced the upcoming boxing match. A bar was set up next to the TV. Clara slept in a hospital bed on the window side of the room. Boxes of craft supplies were piled high in every corner.

Clyde grasped my hand. "Haven't seen you for years." He motioned to a purple couch adjacent a brown leather recliner that clearly belonged to the head of the house. We were about to sit when Clara opened her eyes and smoothed her hair. She was frail but strikingly attractive, an example of peacefulness so characteristic of those who have resolved their conflicts with the beyond. She wore a blonde wig and pink slippers. A multicolored crocheted lap robe covered most of her red sweatpants.

Mac led me to her bed. He kissed Clara on the cheek. "You remember Patricia?" Clara's eyes brightened, and she nodded just enough to let me know that she did.

"I remember hiding out with you under a staircase in Gold Beach" I said. She smiled.

The hollow cheeks and lethargic movements told me that I would not see Clara again. The brief social exchange took all her energy, and she fell back into a medicated sleep.

Mac and I took Clyde's offer to "rest our bones" on the well-worn couch facing the silent TV. Clyde stood in front of me. His Hawaiian shirt didn't quite cover the round expanse of his belly.

"Want a drink?" Clyde went behind the bar and reached for the martini glasses. He looked my way. "Patricia?"

"No, thank you. I'm driving. Do you have something non alcoholic?"

"A soda?"

"Sure."

To Mac, Clyde said, "I know you do."

"Just one. I have to behave myself. I'm with Patricia."

The men laughed and I wondered what inside joke they shared at my expense.

"When I heard about Virginia, I thought you might be up this way," Clyde said. "Too bad about her!"

"Yeah, she was doing well when I left."

"But you knew it wouldn't last." Clyde spoke to Mac as a father might to a son.

Mac shrugged. "Yeah, I knew, but I had no choice. I had to get work."

Clyde mixed a drink for himself. "That no-good son of yours should be in jail."

"He's a fast talker," Mac said. "I'll bet he'll talk his way out of this one too." Mac glanced at a sleeping Clara. "How's she doing?"

"Hmmm? Some days are better than others." Clyde nodded toward the muted TV. "We were getting ready to watch the fights."

"I wanted to see that fight too," Mac said. He squeezed my hand. "Patricia, it won't last long."

"Don't let me interrupt. I'll not say a word while you guys get your testosterone fix."

The men grinned. Clara slept.

I curled up on the couch. Clyde and Mac mimicked the blow-by-blow action on the screen, ducking and jabbing like aging has-beens. They argued with the commentary and screamed in protest to unfair calls. The announcer and the crowd went wild as the fighters pummeled each other. "Hit him, Sugar Ray!" Clyde yelled.

After many more crowd pleasing punches, Sugar Ray Leonard landed a knockout blow, and the fight ended. Clyde silenced the TV and limped from the chair to the bar to freshen drinks. "He grimaced and hit his fist against his chest. "Damned indigestion!" he mumbled.

Once adequately liquefied, the men broke into entertaining small talk. They told stories about building power lines, about moving across country, about all night parties in hotel rooms, about men now gone. Clyde and Mac covered much history that afternoon, and I listened, fascinated with the richness of tales growing taller with the telling.

After hearing favorites for a third time, I glanced at my watch. It was nearing five o'clock. With a sense of urgency, I put my coat on and encouraged Mac to do the same. I dreaded the pounding rain, and I hated to leave Mac's friends and the warmth of their humble home, but responsibility called.

As we gathered our things and got dressed for the weather, Clara reached for Mac's hand, her frail fingers grasping his bony ones.

"This may be the last time I get a chance to give you advice, young man."

Her voice was weak, so he leaned over to hear what she had to say. "Yes ma'am!"

"You should marry this woman."

Mac stepped back, his eyes wide. "I would, Clara, but she's already married."

"That never stopped you before." Clara's tight jaws and penetrating eyes said she was serious.

"That's true, but this lady is hard to convince." He patted Clara's hand. "We need to go now. Let's talk about this again the next time I see you."

"There won't be a next time." Clara sighed and closed her eyes.

Mac gave her a kiss on the cheek, and then he turned away so neither of us could see his tears.

We left Clara in the family room. Clyde escorted us to the door, chatting merrily while we made our way through ceramics, pictures, and lace.

As we walked down the path to the car, Mac took my arm. "She's right, you know."

"I know, but that's a moot point now, don't you think?"

"It could change."

"What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't have to stay married."

"I probably won't, but would that make a difference?"

"It could." Mac opened the car door for me.

"I don't think so. It's too late for us."

When we arrived at Mac's pickup, he kissed me goodbye, leaving a lipstick smear on his mouth. "Let me wipe that off," I said, pulling a Kleenex from my purse.

"No, leave it there. It will give the boys at Dave's something to talk about."

The next contact I had from Mac came from Phoenix. Every year, on my birthday and Christmas, Mac remembered me with a Hallmark card, the most ostentatious on the shelf. He seldom added a personal note, but the year after our visit with Clyde and Clara, he wrote:

Clara's gone. Clyde too. He went first. Had a massive heart attack while shopping. Jeanette had her mother put in a nursing home and Clara died in less than a week.

Jeanette wants to get back together. Fat chance!

The Ashes of Phoenix

Nothing went right that February in 1995. Bill had long ago disappeared, Oregon was steeped in budget cuts, and I was getting hints that I should retire. It had rained for three months straight, and I needed a vacation, someplace warm and dry.

Arizona! Mac lived in Arizona. He could suggest a vacation spot. It had been six years since I'd seen him, but I knew my old friend would help me out. I called. "I'm going crazy in this Oregon rain. I'd like to spend a few days in your warm and dry state. I was wondering if you knew the hot spots in Phoenix, and I need a place to stay – on a bus line so I can get around the city without a car."

"I know the perfect place," he said.

"Where?"

"Here."

I had always felt comfortable with Mac, but his ability to drop everything and open his home after ten years of being apart amazed me.

"That's most gracious of you," I said.

"I'll pick you up at the airport. You won't need a car. I'll drive you wherever you want to go. When will you arrive?"

A few days later, Mac met me at the Sky Harbor Airport, and six years folded into a moment. Mac had been smaller each time I had

seen him, but this time he was so thin that the shape of his bones showed through his tight jeans. He probably didn't weigh as much as I did.

We loaded luggage into his car and drove across downtown Phoenix. I luxuriated in warmth, noting the abundance of cacti and rocks in the landscape. We left the business district and drove into a section of town where large older homes made a statement about the city's history. Beyond that, we went through the apartment district and into the modular home communities. We passed through a gate and stopped in front of a white dwelling with a narrow strip of coarse grass around it. A covered vehicle sat on a concrete pad next to the street.

"Is that your Mark IV?" I asked.

"It sure is."

"Do you ever drive it?"

"No, I want to keep it nice. It will be worth money some day." Mac smiled. "We had some good times in that car, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did, and some not so good. I remember one particularly scary ride on Highway 101."

"Oh, I remember that one too. The look on your face was priceless. You were furious. I'm surprised you gave me a second chance."

I had to agree that Mac drove me to my breaking point, but even back then, I wasn't able to set limits where he was concerned.

"You gave me many chances, and I blew them. If I had made more of an effort, maybe we would still be together."

"Mac, I don't think so. We went in different directions a long time ago. We have good memories, but that's all we have."

While we were staring at the Mark and talking about what might have been, I thought about how I had changed. If Mac had come into my life for the first time that day in Phoenix, I would have pitied him, but I wouldn't have been attracted to him. In spite of that, the memories carried a spark of passion, but our time had passed.

Mac parked his car next to a doublewide, a modular dwelling made like all the other homes in the park. We went inside. Ten years had passed since I had visited Mac's home, but many familiar objects caught my attention. The wall hanging of the little orange moon rising over the mountains I had given him after our first big fight was a bit faded and dusty, but conspicuous in its placement opposite the front door. The newspaper picture of me that Mac had laminated hung in a gold frame behind his desk. The birthday card I had sent him a month earlier lay open like he'd been looking at it before leaving to pick me up at the airport. The cast iron skillet I had been using the night John barged into the trailer sat on the range top. I felt like I had stepped back in time.

"Care for a cup of coffee?"

I nodded.

Mac reached into an upper cabinet and took an old coffee maker down. "Do you remember this?" he asked.

"I certainly do. It's the one we used in Gold Beach."

"I don't drink coffee anymore, but I keep it for–" He left the sentence dangling, but I knew what he meant. He kept it for me.

I wondered what Mac had been doing those last ten years. The memorabilia I had of him was tucked away in boxes and files. He was a part of my history, but in Mac's home, history was on display.

Mac set the pot to brewing. He took a handful of pills from a bottle, poured a glass of V.O. and downed the medication with the whisky.

I cringed. "Shouldn't you take those with water?"

"Now you're sounding like that quack I see. You know I don't drink water, never have. He thinks I should take this stuff with food, and I don't cook for myself either."

"Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"Maybe. I've thought about it. That would be the easy way."

Mac talked about killing himself so often that I no longer took him seriously.

"Do you remember this, the B.V. Cabernet I bought for your birthday, the time Dave took us to Henry Ford's?" Mac pointed to a bottle on the shelf.

"You still have that? Yes, I remember that particular birthday. Not fondly, but I remember."

"I kept it, thinking we'd open it when we got back together. Maybe we'll do that before you leave."

"You mean, open the bottle?"

"Yeah, that's what I mean."

I wasn't sure but I thought I detected a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

He took my luggage into a bedroom where he found a space in the closet to hang my clothes. When I looked around, I could see that this was his bedroom. I wondered if he intended for us to sleep together.

"Harry and Lynda have invited us to dinner," Mac said. "They're anxious to meet you. Would you like to go?"

"Who's Lynda?"

"Didn't I tell you about her? She's Harry's new wife. They haven't been married long. Still getting acquainted."

"Sure, I'd like to meet them, but I need to get cleaned up."

"Help yourself to the bathroom or whatever you need. Get some rest if you can. They're likely to keep us out late. I'll call you in a couple of hours." Mac closed the door and left me on my own.

I unpacked a few things and laid out Arizona appropriate clothing for later, and then I lay down on Mac's bed. A blend of smells – aftershave, fabric softener, and Mac's scent – filled my senses. I heard the TV playing somewhere in the distance and an occasional flush of a toilet. I dozed off. I don't know how long I slept, but I wasn't ready to wake up when Mac knocked on the door.

"Time to go."

I splashed my face with cool water to hasten my awakeness, dressed quickly, and met Mac in the living room. He picked up his keys, and we were out the door.

He took my arm and guided me to the passenger side of his car. "Just one thing, Patricia, I know you don't drink, but don't insult Harry by asking for tea or coffee."

We drove to the old part of town. Mac parked at the curb of a well-maintained Spanish Colonial with palm trees shading a brick walk winding up to a screened porch with arched stucco walls.

I had heard stories about Harry since 1978. Each tidbit of information added to an encyclopedia of knowledge about a man I knew only by reputation. With each step toward the tastefully designed older home, I grew more curious. I had the urge to stand up straight.

The maid guided us to the dining room where Harry was mixing drinks at a wet bar as well stocked as any commercial establishment I had ever seen. His white hands worked expertly, completing Mac's martini. Manicured fingers placed three olives on a toothpick and laid them at the edge of the glass, just the way Mac liked it. I could see that it had been some time since Harry had worked in construction.

We watched the performance in silence and Mac waited for him to finish before making the formal introduction. He cleared his throat. "Harry, I'd like you to meet Patricia."

"Pleased to meet you," Harry said, bowing slightly. "Mac talks about you all the time."

"He has told me a few stories about you, too," I said.

"Don't believe him. He lies. What are you drinking?"

My knowledge of mixed drinks was sorely lacking, so I relied on what I had seen on TV. "A margarita," I said.

Harry resembled a banker. His round blue eyes looked through round wire-rimmed glasses. Everything about Harry was round, from his bald head to his belly to his short wide feet. Even his knees rounded out the hairy legs between Birkenstocks and khaki shorts. Mac was several inches taller than Harry, but standing behind his bar, Harry loomed large, a no-nonsense perfectionist who enjoyed creating liquid enchantment, a margarita complete with salt ring for me.

Harry's wink drew his upper lip into his round cheek. He searched through a drawer for more toothpicks and not finding what he wanted, he grew impatient. "Lynda, where are you?" He turned to the maid. "Find my wife. Tell her our guests have arrived."

"Sí señor."

"I'm coming," said a lilting voice from the hall. Lynda coasted into the room like an Olympic skater, reached into a drawer and found the toothpicks that had escaped Harry's eye. "Sorry I'm late." She glided across the room and grasped my hand. "I'm thrilled to finally get to meet you." Her copper colored hair framed a face enhanced by perfectly applied makeup. Her hazel eyes held me in her spell, and I felt my secrets flowing from my heart to hers. "It's like I know you already," Lynda said. "Mac talks about you all the time."

Having heard "all the time" twice in two minutes made me a little self-conscious, but Lynda's gracious smile was that of an old friend. She appeared to be about my age, someone who took care of herself, and someone who preferred comfort to fashion. She wore a simple skirt and matching cotton shirt in colors that enhanced the muted highlights of her auburn hair. Her only jewelry was a gold wedding band.

Lynda motioned to me. "Bring your drink. It's Harry's turn to cook, and I want to show you my garden. Mac says you know a lot about plants."

I followed her. "I know about Northwest plants, but I'm no Arizona gardener."

We walked around the yard and Lynda revealed her talents in arranging rocks with sand and cacti. She had created Southwestern beauty with native resources. We sat in the shade of a huge bougainvillea in full bloom, providing a privacy hedge from the street beyond.

"How did you get that hedge to grow so big in Arizona?" I asked. "They take a lot of water."

"Yes they do, and if you look closely, you'll see a soaker hose running the full length at ground level. It's worth the expense for the afternoon shade."

"I like Arizona so far, and Mac seems to prefer being here," I said.

"I'm not so sure. He's moody much of the time – nostalgic." Lynda leaned back in the lounge chair and closed her eyes as if in deep concentration. "He didn't want to leave Washington, you know. Held out as long as he could, hoping you two would get back together."

"I don't understand. Mac didn't want to get back together."

Lynda's brow wrinkled. "But he did. He's been waiting for you for years."

"That's hard to believe," I said. "Before I married Bill, I asked Mac if he'd like to start over and he turned me down. Said it was too hard."

The vertical lines in Lynda's brow went even deeper. "It wasn't the relationship that was too hard, Patricia. It was the money."

Echoes of first-class-or-not-at-all filled my head.

"Harry told me that he and Mac have been buddies since they were young men working for Bonneville Power. After Harry's first wife died, they called each other often, and during one of those calls, Mac unloaded. His sister needed professional care, they were close to losing the house, and he couldn't find work. Harry found a job for Mac down here and helped him get his finances in order. When he got back on his feet and could afford you, you were married to someone else."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"That's what Harry told me."

"I never expected Mac to support me. I could have helped him out if I had known."

Lynda looked at me and shook her head. "You don't get it, do you? Your financial independence made it impossible for Mac to be in control. In his mind, you were out of reach."

Lynda was interpreting stories she had heard from Harry as well as bits of information she had gained directly from Mac. None of this was hard science, but it held a ring of truth that made sense to me. Mac tried to give me more than I could give myself. Even the disastrous night with Dave and Barbara at Henry Ford's Restaurant was Mac's attempt to treat me with class. It all came together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Mac needed money to be able to love me. He didn't value the tender soul he possessed or the charm that turned women's heads. He tossed his potential for learning aside like a vending machine toy. Frequent sex, eating at high priced restaurants, a shiny new car, and a wad of bills in his money clip made Mac feel like a man, and when he was sure of those things, he wore me on his arm like an expensive plaything. Without them, he dared not touch the hem of my skirt.

Lynda continued. "After the accident, Harry helped Mac get a reasonable settlement from the insurance company. Mac has enough money to live well – if he's careful."

"But his body is shot. It's like he's killing himself one piece at a time."

"Harry's the same way," Lynda said. "They're from the old school where hard work and heavy drinking define the man."

Lynda and I had finished our drinks when the maid announced dinner. Delicious smells from the kitchen pointed the way to the dining table.

Harry's talents as a cook exceeded his bartending skills. He served a lamb dish that had been in his family for generations. He claimed he hadn't changed the recipe from the original Greek version. It was delicious. The four of us sat around the table and talked well into the night.

It was late when we returned to Mac's home and to his bedroom. Mac's intentions were vague. It had been a long time since I had enjoyed the delights of intimacy, and I wanted Mac to sleep with me, but I doubted myself. I doubted him. When we were younger, he told me that he wouldn't be able to get it up with an old woman, and I was almost sixty. Remembering that discussion increased my feelings of inadequacy. I should have stayed at a motel and protected my ego, but it was too late for that.

Mac noticed a few pieces of laundry on the floor in the bedroom, and he picked them up and tossed them in the hamper. "The guys, Harry and the others, say I should have a woman around to take care of the place, but I don't want a wife. I've lived alone too long."

"I know what you mean. Marrying Bill was a mistake, but I learned my lesson. I do better solo."

"Me too, but having you around always feels right, like we were meant to be a team. Remember when we moved all those shrubs. You worked like a man." Mac shook his head. "Those were the good times."

"I remember the good times, but I also remember some very difficult days," I said.

Mac hung his head. "I know."

I was so tired that my eyes crossed. I opened a bag, took my bathrobe out, and laid it on the bed.

Mac turned his hands up. "What's mine is yours. Make yourself comfortable," and he disappeared.

I changed into bedclothes and crawled in bed. I listened to the unfamiliar sounds around me: the ticking of the clock, the traffic on the street, and the sounds of water running in the pipes. The TV went off. Shortly after, I heard Mac open the door. In the dark, he stood close to me and stroked my hair.

"It's been a long time," he said.

"It's late. Maybe we should just go to sleep."

Mac chuckled. "Now that isn't what you really want, is it?"

I didn't answer but I didn't object either when he slid into bed next to me. I had to admit, I would have been disappointed if Mac had not wanted sex, but I wasn't ready. Mac was. I closed my eyes, hoping to respond, but everything happened fast – too fast.

Mac rolled over to the other side of the bed, and we lay there in the darkness, neither of us saying a word. The noise from the clock pounded in my ears like the throb of a bass drum.

After several minutes, Mac took my hand. "I'm sorry," he said. "I guess I'm not the man I thought I was." He got out of bed and left me alone. We slept in separate beds for the remainder of the vacation.

All too soon, vacation was over and Mac was driving me back to the airport. Mac clutched the wheel with both hands. “I’m sorry about the other night. I’m out of practice.”

“Me too.”

“I should have tried harder. I don’t mean about the other night. I mean I should have tried harder when we were together, and I should have–”

“Mac, don’t.”

“But if I had, we might still be together.”

“I don’t think so. At some point, one of us would have had to change, and we’re both too stubborn.”

Mac patted my thigh. “Perhaps, but you were the best thing that ever happened to me, and I let you slip away.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. There is nothing simple about human love, and something powerful brought me to Phoenix. I thought I had come for respite from Oregon rain, but I found myself engaged in an old love affair. I flew through emotions like a circus performer swinging by my ankles, reaching out to the man I once loved, and missing. We had always been close, just one grasp of the wrist away from being spectacular, but one grasp away we remained. Fear of repeating past mistakes had made me cautious, but it was money that determined our fate, money that I had if he had been humble enough to turn to me for support.

Mac kissed me at the gate. This time the kiss felt like a final goodbye. “You were good for me, Patricia. I’m glad we had six years together. Those years have kept me going, but it’s never going to work for us, is it?”

Tears lay ready to spill from behind my eyelids. I choked on my words. “Mac, I don’t think so.”

“Then I’ll have to drink the Cabernet by myself.”

I laughed. I could depend on Mac’s humor to lighten a dark moment.

“Flight 628 to Portland, Oregon, now boarding,” came the announcement over the loudspeaker. I tore myself away from Mac and went through the gate to the plane, found my seat, and looked out the window at the Arizona landscape, fully aware that I was leaving a piece of history behind.

The greeting cards from Phoenix arrived as before, every birthday and Christmas, and occasionally on Valentine’s Day. Short notes told me what was on Mac’s mind at the time he sent them:

> Virginia is doing well in the state hospital. She still preaches, but she’s eating and seems physically healthy.
>
> Donna’s little girl, now sixteen, has breast cancer. Donna is taking it hard.
>
> Dave’s sister moved to Phoenix. Still talks too much. Dave doesn’t understand why I don’t take her out. Ha! That will be the day!

Twenty-one ten is rented out. The state of Washington will get the property when Virginia and I are both gone.

I gave the trailer to Dave. It wasn't worth much.

The Cabernet tasted like vinegar.

Making Amends

Back home in Oregon, I went through a stack of mail and found a letter postmarked Clearwater, Florida. The writer wanted information about a project I had been working on, and I answered the request with a complete report. I received a second letter, a third, a fourth, and then I lost count. Over the next few weeks, the letters changed in tone from business to personal, and eventually evolved into love letters. Six months later, Bob, the Florida correspondent, and I met at a convention in Washington D.C. We hit it off from the beginning.

Expectations for my job were changing, and I felt I had to run just to stay in place. I couldn't keep up with the young bright talents who envied my position. I felt obsolete. It was time to step aside for those more eager and more capable. I set a goal to retire on my sixty-second birthday.

My first grandchild was born in February of 1998. I worked my last day March the first and moved to Tumwater, Washington to be near my daughter and her family. Bob, the man from Florida, retired also. He decided to relocate in the Northwest, and with a little help from me, he found an apartment a block away from my place. By November, we had settled in as a couple.

Two years later, in July of 2000, Mac called. "I'm going to be in your neighborhood," he said. "Have to go to Federal Way. I want you to go with me."

"Why? What's in Federal Way?" My life had changed. Bob met my needs for companionship, and Mac's bittersweet affection had lost its appeal.

"I want to see Ben, my grandson," he said.

"What's the occasion?"

"He graduated from high school this year. Doesn't seem like it's been that long since he was a toddler."

"Time goes fast for me too."

"Yeah, been years since I was in Federal Way, and it's changed. That's why I need you."

"You want me to navigate?"

"Yes, would you?"

"I won't be much help. I haven't driven in Federal Way." Mac's request put me in an awkward position. Bob and I had a good thing, and I didn't trust Mac's intentions.

"Can you read a map?"

"Yes, I can do that." My better judgment objected, but I was curious about Mac's health. I wanted to know if he was feeling better than when I saw him last.

"Karen sent good directions."

"Who's Karen?"

"Ben's mother. The nice Christian girl Ronnie married and divorced. I haven't seen her since I moved, and it's time. Ben was just starting school when I got work in Arizona."

"Will Ronnie be there?" I asked. The possibility of seeing Ronnie turned my stomach.

Mac snorted. "Not likely. He's disappeared. Even missed his son's graduation. That torques my jaws."

I heard Mac inhale and I could almost smell the cigarette smoke.

"Well, that's it. Will you help me out?"

"Sure." Maybe I was making a mistake; but my affection for Bob was solid. Helping an old friend would not be a problem.

Mac picked me up at my apartment a few days later. Although he limped, he appeared healthier than I remembered. I looked for signs that he had quit smoking, but that distinctive bulge in his shirt pocket told me otherwise.

"I had one hell-of-a time finding this place," he grumbled. "The sign is hidden behind a tree. Had to stop and ask."

"I'm glad to see you too," I said, hoping to counter his critical tone. "Care to come inside?"

Mac looked around as if contemplating the options. "When we get back. Karen is expecting us."

He escorted me to a rental car that smelled like camphor. Once seated, Mac handed me a map and a letter with a Federal Way return address. "This is where we're going. I'm depending on you to get us there."

"No promises."

Mac grinned. "Then we'll be lost together." He raised an eyebrow. "We've always been lost together."

"Have we?" I had to smile. Mac must have been as perplexed by our relationship as I was.

We made a couple of wrong turns, but we eventually arrived at the address on the letter. Mac's grandchildren lived in a handsome dwelling in a well-maintained subdivision. Mac parked his car on a slope in front of the garage under a second floor overhang.

"This is it." Mac craned his neck to see the upper level of the two-story house. "Nice!"

"Very nice," I said, "Wish I could live like that. What does your daughter-in-law do?'

Mac smirked. "You don't know the story, do you?"

"Story?"

"Karen's grandmother has money, lots of money. Grandma supported the kids after Ronnie and Karen divorced. Ronnie refused to pay child support, and Karen's income as a public school teacher didn't stretch far enough to maintain a lifestyle that met Grandma's standards." Mac opened the car door. "Let's go," he said. "I see someone watching."

"Where?"

"There, at the large window."

I looked up just in time to see the curtain move. Seconds later, the front door opened. A petite woman wearing black low-heeled shoes and a navy print dress stood in the doorway. A repeated hand movement restrained a strand of hair persistent in wandering from the twisted braid on the back of her head. With stiff steps, she ushered us into a sitting room decorated like a chapel. Religious art and a large Bible were the only signs of amusement in the entire room

From where I stood, I could see into a larger room wrapped around a huge fireplace. Hardbound books filled the walls and a four-foot brass-mounted globe almost concealed the teenaged girl sitting cross-legged on the floor between the globe and the fire. Stacks of books made a fortress around her.

From the archway, Karen spoke to her daughter. "Erin, say hello to your grandfather."

A head of honey colored curls turned and deep marine blue eyes sent an icy stare our way. She studied us for a moment, glared at her mother, and without a word, returned to her reading.

Karen shrugged. "She's my studious one," she said. "Ben's the social one."

The phone rang. I turned my head to the sound, but Karen ignored it. "It's for Ben. It always is."

A male voice from the upper level told the caller to call back, and then number thirteen sized athletic shoes – or bigger – pounded down the stairs. A lanky young man leaned over the banister. "Are you my granddad?" he asked Mac.

"Yes, I am."

"Thought so. You look like your picture. Who's she?" He nodded in my direction.

"Her name's Patricia. She's my friend, and my guide. I wouldn't have found you without her."

Mac's explanation satisfied the teenager. His next question was more difficult. "Did my dad come with you?"

Mac turned slowly in his chair, "I haven't seen your father in nearly a year," He stood up and looked up the staircase at his

grandson. “Look at you,” Mac said. “You were just a little kid when I saw you last. “Are you a basketball player?”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Everyone asks me that. No. I like tennis and golf, but I don’t play team sports.”

“Ben works at Safeway,” Karen said. “The job and advanced placement classes kept him busy during the school year. He didn’t have time for basketball.”

I heard a definite bias against sports in her tone.

“Ben, bring the beverages from the kitchen, please. They’re in the fridge.”

“Sure.” The teenager sprung into action, went to the kitchen, and returned with a tray of iced non-alcoholic drinks. When we were all served, he excused himself and disappeared through the kitchen door.

“Ben’s cooking dinner on the grill tonight. He’s very conscientious. He’ll be back when the meal is ready.”

“But Karen, I asked you out to dinner when I called.” Mac shook his head. “I didn’t expect you to go to all that work for us.”

“It’s our pleasure,” Karen said. “Ben wanted to show off his talents as a grill cook. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

Karen’s explanation sounded false. What were her real reasons for refusing a meal out? Maybe she knew Mac better than I thought. Maybe she knew that Mac’s pattern of restaurant dining began with a minimum of two drinks, and he ordered more after the plates had been cleared. He had done so for years. Karen’s leanings toward fundamentalism would be motivation enough to eat at home rather than expose her children to their grandfather’s drinking habits.

"Ben took over the grill when he was about ten," Karen said. "He had to learn to cook to feed his appetite, but his sister and I have benefited from his expertise." She sighed. "I'll miss him when he goes away to college."

As the outsider, I occupied a comfortable place where I could be politely ignored. I observed the others. Erin managed to lose herself in a stack of books and I intended to share her resources. It struck me that Erin didn't fit the genetic code. Ben and Karen had dark eyes and hair. Ben resembled Ronnie. I would have thought he was his father if I had seen him at a distance. Erin resembled neither her mother nor her father, and she acted like a self-made individualist.

It didn't take long before Karen and Mac brought up Ronnie's infamous history, his drug addiction and miscellaneous evil deeds. Mac told Karen that Virginia was in a mental hospital because of Ronnie, which gave him some credibility with his ex-daughter-in-law.

Although Mac and Karen left me to my own devices, I felt caught in the crossfire. Their conversation was none of my business. Mac had told me more than enough already, and I wanted to stay out of the family dispute altogether. I found a book on religious art and hid behind its colorful pages while Karen and Mac exchanged horror stories.

I glanced at Erin who used the same ruse as I; only she was better at it, had more practice. I noted her posture and the books she had chosen for her fortress. Most were large, dark, and heavy. The information between the covers had to be dull, not the usual reading for a pretty teen.

The pitch and volume of Karen's voice escalated to the point that I had to concentrate to block it out. When I heard her say, "I called the police when I found out," I gave up.

"He'll be doing time for what he did," Karen said. "There's a restraining order on him now. If he gets close to her, I'll kill him." Her eyes went to the girl wrapped in a blanket inside a cell of books. "She hasn't been the same since." Karen turned and stared out the window. "God has a plan for Ronnie. I don't know what it is, but I hope it doesn't include this family. I can't take any more." Tears filled her eyes.

I didn't know the whole story, but I had experience with Ronnie. I could believe that he was capable of molesting his own daughter. I clenched my teeth to keep from saying something that I'd regret later.

"I wish I could change things," Mac said. "My son has wronged you, and you don't deserve it. I can't do much, but I have a plan to pay your back child support. When I die, you'll get all the money you should have received from Ronnie."

Karen wrinkled her brow. "Why would you do that?"

"It's the right thing to do. I can go to my grave knowing that you'll get your money."

"That's very noble of you, but we're doing all right."

I wondered why she expressed so much irritation. "I don't need your money." Karen excused herself and went to the kitchen.

I didn't know what to think, and I'm sure that Mac didn't either. He had made a big effort to make things right with Karen, and she responded in a most confusing way. Karen deserved credit for making the most of a bad situation, but her cool response was not

what Mac expected. His bent posture told me that he had hoped for a more positive reception.

After Karen left the room, Mac stared at Erin until she felt it. She repositioned herself, moved some of the books, looked over her shoulder several times. She grew increasingly restless until she picked up her book and disappeared from the room.

"They divorced because of that child," Mac said. "Ronnie never did think Erin was his, and he expressed his opinion often and loud. Eventually, Barbara had enough and kicked him out."

"Ronnie's an insensitive clod," I knew from experience that he was capable of rape, but that was an old story. One best left in the past.

"He thinks the girl looks like one of Karen's friends. He wouldn't let something like that pass." Mac shook his head. "I feel sorry for the child."

Karen hadn't been in the kitchen long before food began to show up on the dining room table. Ben came in from the backyard with a tray of steaks and chops. The family gathered. Erin took the seat closest to the corner, her eyes cast downward. Karen brought steaming dishes to the table. She asked me to sit opposite a window. The bright light made me squint. Mac sat next to me, occasionally reaching for the drink he didn't have. Karen said a short prayer. We ate in silence except for Ben who chatted continuously about girls, college, and what his dad had promised him for graduation. Karen rolled her eyes.

After dinner, Karen and I cleared the table and Mac and Ben went out in the backyard to talk. Erin returned to her fortress of books.

"Do you know anything about Mac's health?" Karen asked. "His timing seems odd. I wish he hadn't brought up the back child

support, especially with the children present." Karen filled the dishwasher and ran a sink full of water for glassware. "Does Mac think he's dying?" she asked.

Her question stopped me. "I don't think so," I said. "He said he had a gift for Ben. That's all I know."

"Well, I'm glad Ronnie's not around." Karen dropped a glass into the water with a splash. I expected it to break, but it didn't.

I heard the men on the back porch. Ben's excited "Thank you, Granddad" made it evident that something important had taken place.

Ben exploded through the kitchen door. "Mom, Granddad gave me a check for five thousand dollars. That should cover tuition."

Mac glowed in the background, his chest inflated, standing as tall as I had seen for years.

Karen frowned. "Mac, I want to talk to you – alone."

"I thought you might," he said, and they left Ben and me standing in the kitchen. I polished a glass until it sparkled, set it aside and reached for another. I searched for water spots, anything that would absorb my need to keep my hands busy. Ben excused himself and went outside, but I stayed in the kitchen. When all the glassware glistened like fairy dust, I started over. When the futility of my efforts became apparent, even to me, I leaned against the counter and waited. Twenty minutes later, Mac and Karen returned. Neither seemed especially triumphant, but Mac gathered his things and we left.

On the drive home, Mac was quiet for many miles, and then he opened up. "Karen doesn't want help from Ronnie's side of the family, and she doesn't want any of us near her children. She and her grandmother have raised the kids, and she didn't appreciate the grandstanding I did for Ben's benefit. I told her that I've always felt

bad about Ronnie's neglect, but I didn't have the means to do anything about it until now. She said she'd let Ben keep the money if I would stay out of his life. She thinks I'd be a negative influence. She told me that Ben wants a father so bad that it would be easy for me to become Ronnie's substitute, I told her I'd be going back to Phoenix in a few days, so there wouldn't be much chance for me to contaminate her hard work. She said she was thankful for that. We agreed that the children have a right to know who their grandparents are, but she asked me not to come back, and she hoped I wouldn't try to make contact with Ben behind her back. I told her I'd respect her wishes. Between you and me," he grinned, "if Ben called me, I'd welcome him into my life."

"I think you should!" I said.

"Can't blame Karen, though. Any link to Ronnie would be a problem for her." Under his breath, he added, "and for Erin."

When we returned to my apartment, the lights were on. "It looks like Bob is waiting for me," I said. "Would you like to meet him?"

"Would love to!" Mac followed me inside. I introduced him to Bob. The three of us stood in the entry looking at each other. The men shook hands and lied about being pleased to meet each other. Bob's reaction carried no more feeling than when I introduced him to the mail carrier, but Mac's tension exceeded what the situation deserved. He exchanged a few words and watched me put my coat in the hall closet. He reached for a cigarette, put it back in the package, reached again, put it back. "I have a two hour drive ahead of me," he said. I need to be going. In his most gracious manner, he nodded to Bob.

"Nice meeting you. Keep in touch," he said to me, and the door closed between us.

I heard his car drive away. I didn't expect it to go far. We had been together for ten hours and he hadn't taken a drink in all that time. Mac would be looking for the nearest bar. Otherwise, he'd be expressing his frustration in traffic. In his younger days, he showed impatience behind the wheel, but with the years, impatience had turned to road rage. I hoped the people he encountered stayed out of his way.

The cards and notes continued:

> Ronnie is in prison.
>
> Erin is receiving therapy.
>
> Donna's little girl is getting chemo.
>
> Jeanette died. Heart attack.
>
> The neighbors made me move the Mark; said it was an eyesore. I sold it to a junk dealer. Paid to have it hauled away.
>
> I was in the VA hospital for a couple of days. Pneumonia.
>
> Are you and the man from Florida still together?

I miss you, sweetheart.

Last Call

In December 2004, like every December since 1978, I sent Mac a holiday greeting. Only this time I addressed an envelope and inserted the same generic newsletter that I sent to all the others on my list. Halfway through the process, I stopped. I felt a pang of guilt because Mac had always given me one of Hallmark's best. I needed something more personal than a dispassionate newsletter for the man I had known for twenty-seven years. But I had to be careful. Circumstances had changed, and I was happy with Bob. I didn't want to send misleading signals to either man.

I pondered my options. Mac envied my ability to write. He said he did well to write his name, so he chose cards to say what he couldn't. I had just finished a story about my fiftieth class reunion that he would find amusing. I scribbled a personal note about old times at the bottom of the newsletter and dropped it and the reunion story in the envelope to Mac.

A few days before Christmas, Mac called. I recognized his voice, but it was different – weak and raspy; it lacked the deep sexy timbre that first attracted my attention.

"Hello sweetheart," he said.

His greeting gave me a nostalgic thrill. He still had that effect on me.

"I wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas."

"And the same to you," I replied.

His words came with effort. "You won't be getting a card from me this year. Can't get out to buy one."

What was he telling me? I knew Mac had been ill, but for Mac to admit that he couldn't get out to buy a Christmas card meant he was seriously ill.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"My lungs. Emphysema. On oxygen now."

Those damned cigarettes! I predicted that they would destroy his lungs, and I wondered about the condition of his liver.

"I read your story. It's my favorite." He wheezed and faltered as he spoke.

"Mac, take your time. There's no need to hurry."

"Just got home from the hospital. Had surgery."

"So you're recovering and aren't strong enough to get out? I remember how that is." I chatted on to give Mac a rest. "It took a while before I wanted to leave home after my last surgery, but I'm fine now. It just takes some time."

"Pneumonia too," he said.

"Sounds like you've had some bad days." I tried to be positive and cheerful – Mac hated sympathy – but I noticed that Mac didn't ask about my children, or my work, or if I had my Christmas lights up. He had no energy. He gasped for enough breath to speak.

"You are feeling better now that you're home, aren't you?" I asked.

Mac didn't answer. I could hear his belabored breathing. The thought: if you ever want to see this man again, you need to go to him

now, crossed my mind. But I couldn't go to him. My calendar was full. I considered going in June when I would have more time.

"Can't drive. Harry, Lynda run errands for me." Mac's words were slow and choppy. "Won't bother them with special favors. Didn't get a card for you."

"That's all right, Mac. Your phone call is just as good." It was a polite lie. I valued Mac's cards, and I would miss his annual greeting. Since 1978, a Hallmark from the top row of the sales rack had arrived in my mailbox at Christmas and my birthday without fail. The card must have been selected from many because it always contained a respectful yet affectionate message that fit our situation at that time. I looked forward to seeing the Phoenix postmark and Mac's distinctive handwriting, one more masterpiece to add to the fattening manila envelope in my desk. "I kept most of your cards," I said. "Some were works of art."

"I kept all of yours."

I remembered the day in 1995 when I entered Mac's home in Phoenix and saw the coffee pot and the cast iron skillet we had used in Gold Beach. The birthday card I had sent to him laid open on his desk.

"I cleaned out the living room and there were boxes of them. Patricia, if I had tried harder. If I had made more of an effort..."

"We both made mistakes, Mac. What we had was good, but it ended. That wasn't your fault. It just happened."

"Are you still with your friend, the one I met?"

"Yes, we get along well."

"Oh."

Soon Mac's lungs gave out and we had to stop talking. His parting words were, "I love you, sweetheart. Wanted you to know."

I held the phone in my hand long after the conversation ended, pondering Mac's final statement. In twenty-seven years, he had never said he loved me. Neither of us had ever used that expression of endearment with each other. Why was it important for him to tell me now? A chill of fear ran through me. Was Mac sicker than he sounded, or worse, was he considering– ? No, he wouldn't do that.

I searched through dusty files and closets until I found everything Mac had given me, spread it out on the table, and absorbed it. I read the words in each card, especially the notes Mac had written, and I studied the pictures. We were so different, Mac and I.

One card, more worn than the rest and tear-stained came to the surface; the card Mac had given me for my birthday in 1980. I pictured the gift shop with strains of *The Music Box Dancer* flooding the tiny room with sound, the tune that made me think of Mac every time an ice cream cart passed my door. If Mac had said he loved me when he gave me that card, our lives would have been different, but he chose to wait until now.

Mac's parting words haunted me, and I promised myself that I'd go to him as soon as I had a little more time. Bob would understand. He might even go with me, but Bob was the man in my life now, and I had to balance my concern for Mac with my respect for Bob.

In January, I fell and spent some time in the hospital. Mac's problems faded from my thoughts as I dealt with my own. Once I

recovered, I pushed myself to complete unfinished tasks that required immediate attention.

In early April, Mac's presence felt so strong that it interfered with my concentration. I reviewed my calendar for undone tasks. I had missed his birthday. I went to the phone to call him. Both numbers were out of service. What had happened? Maybe Mac had gone back into the hospital. Maybe he had been moved to a care facility. Maybe he was living with a friend or one of his grandchildren. Or worse, maybe he was gone. No, I refused to consider that possibility.

I searched my records for phone numbers, email addresses, for a contact with someone who would know. I came up dry. I went to the internet and searched the public records. I found nothing.

If he had moved, perhaps the Postal Service would forward a letter. Mac would never leave his home, not even if he became too ill to care for himself. I worded the letter carefully in case someone other than Mac read it. I told him that we had good memories, and even after all these years, I still had loving feelings for him. I lifted the pen off the page and listened. In the distance, an ice cream truck's tinkling melody grew fainter and fainter until there was no sound.

On April 22, two weeks after I mailed the letter, I was rushing from my Olympia apartment to meet a friend. I had my hand on the doorknob when the phone rang. I had no time to talk so I let it ring. From my answering machine, I heard a woman's voice say, "Pat, this is Lynda from Phoenix."

My ride could wait. I slammed the door, turned, and grabbed the phone. Lynda would know what had happened to Mac. My breath came fast and shallow. "Hello Lynda. I'm here."

"I have some bad news," she began. "Mac's dead."

I heard her words but I felt disconnected, like I was hearing a radio message of a disaster happening somewhere in the third world. It wasn't real. Mac couldn't be dead. This was happening to someone else, not to me. I was on the outside, watching a fiction unfold, but it would be okay once reality returned.

As much as I tried to deny the truth, Lynda's voice cut through my resistance. I didn't want to believe her, but I knew Mac was dead. I had known it on some level days before she called.

"He'd been sick for over a month and he wasn't getting any better," Lynda said. "You and Mac always had a special connection, and I wanted to call you when it happened, but we couldn't find your telephone number."

"When did he die?"

"March eighteenth, the day after St. Patrick's day. That was always a special day for him, but he didn't even try to go out this year. He wouldn't let us give him a birthday party either." Lynda's message sounded rehearsed, like she had delivered it over and over again to too many of Mac's friends. "You know how Mac was – had to be in control – wouldn't let anybody do anything for him. But Mac was so sick that he couldn't live alone, and we were telling him that he needed help. He didn't want to hear that."

"He always said he'd kill himself rather than go into a care facility."

Lynda was silent. Why? Had Mac taken his own life? To cover my insensitive blunder, I rambled on about Mac, how he hated helplessness in himself and in others.

"Pat, he did kill himself. I was working up to that."

The handgun in the glove box flashed across my mind. "He shot himself, didn't he?"

"Yes, used a Colt Commander, a semi automatic; had pillows and plastic around him to minimize the gore. He knew Harry would be there to find him. Said he had an appointment. It was evident that he had planned it for days."

"For years," I mumbled.

"If we had arrived sooner–" The guilt in Lynda's words rode over the airwaves, but I had my own guilt. I had been so caught up in my own concerns that I had forgotten to send Mac a birthday card. As sick as he was, he had little else to look forward to, and I had let him down.

No matter how much I blamed myself, reason told me that I had nothing to do with Mac's suicide. He had planned his death long before we met. He had discussed it with me as an event that would happen, not one that might happen. To Mac it was the appropriate ending to his life. Neither Lynda nor I could have changed that. Medical treatment might have kept him alive in a weakened state for a few days, months, or maybe years; but Mac would have hated being dependent on anyone, especially strangers in some nursing facility. Suicide finalized Mac's life plan. He never considered long-term care.

"We knew that you would want to know, but we couldn't find a phone number or address anywhere. I had seen your cards and

letters, but he hadn't saved any of them. We searched, but there was no trace of you."

I held the phone long after Lynda had said good-bye. No trace of me? That seemed unreal. When I visited Mac in 1995, the place was a shrine of memories. When I talked to him in December, Mac had said that there were boxes of cards. Where did they go?

Mac had planned every detail of his suicide. He wouldn't have left careless hints of an unresolved love affair for others to find. I could picture him going through his desk and methodically removing my cards and letters, lighting a fire, and systematically burning them. I imagined him removing the news clipping from its frame and letting it smolder on the coals. I could see him taking the needlepoint off the wall, wrapping it brown paper, and dropping it in a trash can, realizing some stranger would carry it away, thinking better of it, taking it out, and burning it too. He would not have quit until he had destroyed every reminder of us, his way of bringing closure to a twenty-seven year affair.

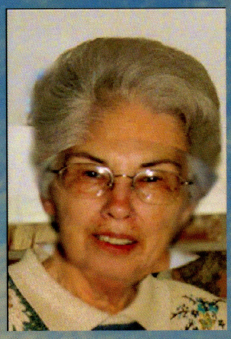
The following Christmas, I sent cards to my friends, but the stack of mail the carrier left in the box held little excitement for me. There would never be another oversized card from Phoenix addressed in Mac's precise handwriting. In its place, I cling to the memory of his last words, "I love you, sweetheart. Wanted you to know."

It's About Mac

On April 22, two weeks after I mailed the letter, I was rushing from my apartment in Olympia to meet a friend. I had my hand on the doorknob when the phone rang. I had no time to talk so I let it ring. From the answering machine, I heard a woman's voice say, "Pat, this is Lynda from Phoenix."

My ride could wait. I slammed the door, turned, and grabbed the phone. My breath came fast and shallow. "Hello Lynda, I'm here."

"I have some bad news," she began. It's about Mac.



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